

DISCOVERING YOUR CONGREGATION AND ITS COMMUNITY:
A MODEL FOR TRANSFORMATIVE ENGAGEMENT

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ENGAGEMENT**

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ABSTRACT

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As a hypothesis a newly appointed pastor of a small urban congregation asked if a three-tiered methodology of personal interviews, small-group congregational gatherings and larger neighborhood meetings within the pastor's first year of service could organize and deepen the discovery of the new congregation and its community. Using a qualitative methodology, the Pastor and the context associates collected interview, small group, and larger community meeting data, as well as larger than expected participation, to measure the significant success of the discovery. The results revealed a transformation of the pastor, the Context Associates, the congregation and the community.

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This project was encouraged by the intuitive and wise counsel of two holy men,
Dr. John Paddock and Dr. Robert Walker,
the deep and diverse friendship of Barbara, Don, Greg, Kevin, Melody, Nilsa and Steve,
and the advocacy of Michael Johnson through the West Ohio Conference led by
Bishop Bruce Ough.
Thank you.

DEDICATIONS

This work is dedicated to the inspiration of Jesus the Liberator,
to the genius of the Holy Spirit who called Chris, Courtney, Steve and Tom;
to the powerful truth telling of my children, Luci, Martha and Ben;
to the encouragement of my parents, Raymond and Dorothy Cook;
and to the dreams of God's people at Parkview United Methodist Church.

INTRODUCTION

A wise person once said, “People don’t care what you know until they know that you care.” Caring is inherent in the work of a pastor, but any new pastor knows you can feel like a lost ball in the tall weeds of relationship building when first accepting a new church appointment. Names to learn, family ties within the congregation, how to get around in the community, hospital and nursing home calls, the inevitable funerals for people you haven’t yet met and the challenge of helping the pastor’s family adjust—all these stresses on a new pastor can inhibit or delay the relational ministry of getting to know a church and its community. Getting to know the stories that created the church, the conflicts within the church, the issues that people are dealing with, and family tragedies that did not just disappear when the former pastor left are some of the concerns of a new pastor. Evaluating community outreach and the connectedness of the church to community concerns can take a back seat to more pressing concerns.

Often church members are grieving the loss of the departing pastor who may have been particularly attentive during the loss of a loved one or who may have been a charismatic pastor with excellent preaching skills. It’s a bit like an arranged marriage where the former suitor was the beloved and you are the new substitute with a long-term contract.

Such was the case when this researcher became the new pastor at a small traditional mainline denomination church. Like all new pastors, the pastor becomes a

researcher whether doing formal study or not--simply because there is so much to learn.

The question that this pastor asked was, "Does the new pastor passively accept each situation that arises hoping to learn about the church and meet people along the way, learning their names one by one, or, is there a model that will help the new pastor understand the congregation and its context in the community, developing relationships in a more efficient and manageable way? Through a series of listening meetings with the congregation and with the community, could a pastor actively construct a process of discovery that would reveal the history and the issues and strengths of the congregation and the community while building community within the congregation and within the community? Could discovery meetings help the new pastor to see beyond the tall weeds of the new challenges to become a leader who is not only familiarized with what is happening in the church and in the community, but is engaged in finding opportunities for ministry along the way?

These were the questions this researcher, Rev. Patricia Cook, asked when first coming to Parkview United Methodist Church in July, 2007. This paper details the implementation of a process of listening as a method of discovery, acquainting a new pastor with a new church appointment and the community it serves. The process and its methodology is the substance of the project begun at Bexley UMC, discussed in Chapter One, and revised for the Parkview Church.

In Chapter One Patricia discusses her prior appointment where her initial Doctor of Ministry project began. Her marriage to a law enforcement professional and her calling as a Christian and as a pastor are explored as they intersect with a neighboring community dealing with issues such as gunfire. The chapter describes the genesis of

Patricia's plan to facilitate and expedite her acquaintance with the church, its ministries and the community it serves.

Chapter Two discusses models of discovery in community gathering and organizing as constructs for hearing the dreams and concerns of a congregation and the community it seeks to re-engage.

Chapter Three delves into the theory behind listening and community organizing as they relate to discovering communities and the church. The biblical, historical, theoretical and theological foundations inform the process of engaging the community in this chapter. The biblical foundation is not only relevant but prophetic as well, affirming that God is still in the business of calling humanity to new life, even from the wistful ashes of decline and despair.

Chapter Four describes the research data in the implementation of the project—the calling of the context associates, the listening meetings and emergence of change—addressing the question of how doing the work of listening can facilitate a pastor's understanding of the new context to which she/he is called. The process begins at complete unfamiliarity to the new context to full immersion in the story of the church and its community. The pastor will document how qualitative research, borrowing from Asset Mapping and Appreciative Inquiry theories, helped in an intentional process of discovery of the new church and the community it serves.

Chapter Five details the amazing results of the listening/discovery meetings, encountering people who came, recounting stories, critiquing the process and evaluating the results of the work.

Chapter Six summarizes the results of the project and interprets its implications for further ministry, missional outreach and community involvement. How did the project help to discover the church and its community? What changes did the meetings generate and how will they be implemented? What were the potholes, and how would a researcher change the method to achieve better results? Was community one of the by-products? How was the pastor affected by the process?

The researcher will show that the process of intentional listening is worthy of consideration as a method of discovering the stories of God's people, developing relationships with a new congregation and its community, and discovering whether the method is sensitive to the prophetic voices in the public square.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

A First Look at Parkview

This chapter explores Patricia's change in appointment from Bexley United Methodist Church and the project begun there and how it affected the project she chose at Parkview United Methodist Church, an appointment accepted in the midst of this Doctor of Ministry project. A resident of Columbus, Ohio, for only seven years, Patricia had rarely driven through the Hilltop area of Columbus, so the change of appointment even within Columbus seemed as unfamiliar as a move to Toledo or Tulsa.

The Hilltop area of the West Side has a reputation for being rough and crime infested. A first look at Parkview involved a drive out Sullivant Ave., named for one of the earliest settlers in the area. Sullivant winds up one of the only significant hills in Columbus through a declining urban area called The Hilltop. Used car lots share the street with bars, homes in disrepair, second-hand shops, storefront ministries and stores with barred windows. An abandoned gasoline station is an eyesore, and the local school shows some hope of being renovated with 10-foot fencing around its perimeter.

Within three blocks of the church a convocation of police cars is parked on the street and the sidewalk in random directions, abandoned to what looked like a raid on a large group of Latino men, all with their backs to the street and their hands on the exterior walls of, ironically, the United Methodist Westside Freestore. Around the corner and two

blocks further Parkview UMC stretches into the convergence of Brinker and Algonquin Avenues, the classic stone church facing a large park across the street. The contrast between the graciously pastoral setting of the church and the stark urban cityscape of Sullivant Ave. caused the pastor to wonder how the church and its immediate neighborhood of medium-sized well-kept homes in an area called Westgate, could co-exist, or even engage with, the chaos and urban issues only three blocks away.

The appointment is Patricia's first sole-pastor appointment after appointments as Associate pastor of two large well-heeled United Methodist churches in wealthier and statelier parts of town. She had requested an urban appointment in hopes that she could spend more time in contact with the burden of her heart, the frequency of gunfire in Franklin County, the county in which Columbus sprawls.

Called by Gunfire

Four years before her appointment, "the highway shooter" had eluded police, randomly shooting at cars along I-270, the beltway around Columbus, killing one motorist and hitting several additional cars. Federal agents brought sensors to record and identify the location of gunfire throughout the county. The shooter was eventually arrested with the result that when the gunfire was mapped in 2003, there were certain areas of town that were peppered with gunfire and other areas where no gun had been fired such as in Bexley, the setting of Pastor Cook's former context. The map was published in 2004 on the front page of the local newspaper¹ (see Appendix A) highlighting the pristine environment of Bexley abutting what looked like a war zone on

¹John Fuddy, "Gunshots a Familiar Sound Across City," *The Columbus Dispatch*, 5 April 2008, Sec. A, pp. 1-2.

the Near East Side of Columbus on the map of gunfire. Pastor Cook felt a deep calling about the implications of the map of gunfire and about how the people of Bexley United Methodist Church could respond to the atrocity of their “holy other,” God’s people, yet unmet, who lived in that sea of danger.

Special Insights

For thirty-three years Patricia had been married to a policeman who had learned “Community Oriented Policing” from an old “Com-Sec” model named for “community sector” in Cincinnati. They had met when he was studying Law Enforcement in college, and years later he studied Criminal Justice at the graduate level. Because he was also enrolled in Southern Police Institute at the time, she helped him write his thesis in Community Oriented Policing before he became a police chief and then a safety director in the Cincinnati area. She attended many police chief conventions with him, some of which toured urban environments to learn to visually assess law enforcement issues in urban areas.

It was a hard life moving the family around to different contexts where her husband was required to live in order to serve the municipality where he was Chief or Safety Director. They soon discovered that local governments were led by citizens who are not trained to run municipalities. Councilpersons, mayors, county commissioners and township administrators can often be more political than practical. Well-meaning political decisions can become mistakes, and few politicians are quick to point out their own mistakes. Cover-up can become systemic for so long that corruption in particular municipalities can become a way of life.

Her husband was fired twice for trying to maintain his own ethics. The first firing as Police Chief was for investigating police in his own department charged by a local superstore of falsifying their social security numbers in order to avoid paying self-employment taxes on off-duty details. These police were eventually revealed to be “fence men,” protection for a local county prosecutor who was allegedly running drugs and money through the Cayman Islands. When her husband filed a lawsuit against the local government, it seemed as if the judge was receiving funds from the same slush fund where there was only one party represented in local elections. The judge ruled in favor of the local government. Amid front-page headlines, the pastor’s family was forced to move to a city that had a reputation for corruption because it was the only local job available to someone who had been fired.

His firing as Safety Director was for refusing to ask city contractors to write checks to the Mayor’s campaign fund. He was the first of six Safety Directors fired within four years. Again there were front-page headlines making it even more difficult for the pastor’s husband to find a police administration job. To make ends meet he was forced to take a one-year assignment working for the United Nations in Bosnia at the end of the war there, teaching the Bosnian police democratic policing procedures. The parting was devastating to the family and to the marriage. Another move was inevitable because the local schools there were below minimum state standards. When the Mayor who had fired her husband was finally indicted on twenty-four counts, the local judge from the same political party dismissed the case remarking that the Mayor had never hurt anyone. This is how Patricia became familiar with local politics.

Three months short of full retirement, her husband was forced to take an early retirement and accept a position in Columbus, Ohio, with a car manufacturer, moving the family as well. Columbus had a reputation for its limitations in community oriented policing. But she came to Columbus with a passion for what she had learned about it.

Patricia's first appointment as Student Pastor was at a large United Methodist congregation in Columbus, allowing her to get to know the resources and the challenges of the Columbus area, serving with an ordained deacon who had received a national award for her work with the homeless. Urban issues were the deacon's specialty, and she had a huge influence on Pastor Cook, teaching her about the difference between presence and action and when to use both.

Her second church appointment was as the Associate Pastor of Bexley United Methodist Church, an island of upscale older homes in a declining urban area of East Columbus. Bexley residents are particularly sensitive to reminders of increasing crime encroaching upon its borders, and though they seem to care about local, national and global issues, check writing is the outreach of choice for most of its folks, many of whom lock their doors while driving through the Near East Side.

On New Year's Day, 2004, Pastor Cook received a call from the Senior Pastor of Bexley UMC requesting help for a member of the church. The member was once a homecoming queen of the local high school, became a cocaine addict in her college years, and had become a crack addict. She had allowed her supplier to use her car the prior night, discovering upon waking that he had not returned it to her crack house in a rough area of the Near East Side where she had spent the night. When her car finally appeared near one of her friends' house, she called the Senior Pastor to ask for help in

retrieving it. Going to the police would only reveal her story and her condition. The danger involved prompted him to call the pastor in hopes that her husband might be of some help.

He accepted the challenge, armed himself, picked up the woman at her mother's house and drove to the Miller/Kelton area of the Near East Side. The entire time he was gone Patricia was on her knees praying. She never felt it was the right thing to do as it only enabled the addict to drive herself there again. They succeeded in retrieving her car, and her husband remarked to Patricia that he did not understand how the police could drive by all the crack houses in the neighborhood fifty times a day on patrol without closing them down.

Four months later the map of gunfire previously described appeared on the front page of the local paper, showing the Near East Side, contiguous to Bexley, covered in a sea of gunfire represented by red dots run together on the map. The Miller/Kelton area was in the center of that red sea. Patricia wondered how the Bexley church, full of influential people in the Columbus area, could be of help to the people in the gunfire or simply stand with them in solidarity.

The map became the pastor's constant companion, and she vowed that in time she would either become part of, or initiate, conversations about the gunfire. She showed it to many people in ministry, asking them to react to gunfire going off in Columbus 1.1 times per hour. She asked her husband to help her work towards a solution, but he had just been downsized by the car manufacturer and, jaded from his failures in law enforcement, he left their thirty-three year marriage.

Once the divorce was over it was hard to imagine rebuilding a life that included anything related to law enforcement, but the gunfire map continued to call her. A Doctor of Ministry presentation at United Seminary during an Urban Network meeting called her to consider exploring the gunfire issues in the Near East Side as a project. She applied, was accepted and began to look for a way to connect with the neighborhood next door.

The Next Door Neighbors

A former member of the Bexley congregation was beginning a pastorate of a twenty-five-member Lutheran congregation on Main Street in the Near East Side. Because so much of his church's building was unused he had invited some neighbors from the area to brainstorm how that space could better serve the community. He invited Patricia as well and anyone she wanted to bring from her Bexley congregation.

Although that first meeting was small, concerned residents from a diversity of color and backgrounds creatively brainstormed what might be done with the space. One thing soon became clear: any programming was going to have to be offered in a safe environment, and the *Dispatch* map of gunfire testified to the challenge the neighborhood would face. One resident reported that he was often unable to enter his street because gangs would block his passage. There was a general consensus that the locals just wanted to "take back the neighborhood."

The *Dispatch* gunfire article revealed that many of the calls from residents reporting local gunfire or crimes to the police seemed to be falling on deaf ears. Once the federal agents gathered up totals the Columbus police were surprised at how much gunfire there actually was.

On the Near East Side a local social justice advocacy group, B.R.E.A.D., helped to devise a Hot Spots Campaign whereby locals could fill out postcards to the Police Liaison when their reports did not receive police attention. The police liaison vowed to follow up on each report until the parties in question received a response or even resolution to their complaints. A date was set for a "community walk" where walkers canvassed the community handing out Hot Spots postcards, inviting local residents for a barbecue at the Lutheran church following the walk. It was agreed that the walkers would be safe since the local crime rate was low on Saturday mornings, so several walkers came from the Bexley congregation.

About thirty people showed up to walk that day, and all the Hot Spots Campaign cards were handed out in the community. People were surprised to receive them, and the walkers were surprised to get to meet so many people. The barbecue served nearly one hundred persons. Girls in yellow t-shirts from the South Side Settlement performed jump roping routines, and many who were less interested in the campaign than in food came just to be fed. It was a good day to be with God's people--one small step towards what would become a glimpse of friendship with the Near East Side for the Bexley congregation.

Patricia moved from Bexley to the west side of Columbus the following week, frustrated to leave her ministry and the D.Min. project that had been so much a part of her dream, not to mention the congregation who had seen her through ordination and a divorce. Because United Methodist pastors covenant not to reach back into former congregations, the Near East Side project was truncated, but Patricia had gathered some important insights from the project.

First, Patricia learned that community organizing is as easy as inviting neighbors for conversation and table sharing. Jesus was an inspiring community organizer, feeding five thousand people and expecting them at a rally as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. He did not limit himself to religious activities but was a limitless source of personal hospitality, gathering groups for teaching and healing. He spoke truth to power, addressing temple officials who were in collusion with Rome as puppet tax collectors.²

Second, she found that she could initiate conversations about gunfire and empower people to require local government to respond to it. The local police liaison apologized for whatever violence reports seemed to be ignored and offered to be personally accountable for further reports.

Third, Patricia saw that when the church listened to the community, the church became relevant and involved simply by being the gathering host and providing hospitality.

Fourth, she learned that by holding listening and discovery meetings, a pastor could quickly discern the needs of a community without having to guess. Folks are met more quickly that way than by random meetings, and now the pastor is quickly recognized as a part of the larger community's leadership.

Parkview United Methodist Church

It was armed with these and other lessons that Pastor Cook came to Parkview with good experience in listening and discovery meetings with new friends to make. What better way to get to know a church and its needs as well as its role in the community than

²Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 15-16.

by holding the same kind of meetings with the congregation? Might a respectful, inquisitive and organized system of listening to the congregation help Patricia to more effectively and efficiently learn the rhythms of the congregation, the history of its emergence in the community, and the message it now preaches?

Her District Superintendent had told Patricia a number of things about the congregation during prior conversations:

1. Parkview is an urban congregation. Her first drive out to the church had confirmed that the church is indeed in an urban, formerly suburban, setting.
2. Parkview is a Caucasian congregation. The District Superintendent did not mention this aspect of Parkview which is how she knew they were Caucasian. African American or other ethnic congregations are in the minority of Pastor Cook's denomination.
3. The congregation had bid a couple former pastors an early farewell.
4. Parkview is surrounded by a community of three hundred GLBT (gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender) households, one of the largest gay neighborhoods in the city, and Parkview has not reached out to them. Fortunately there is already a lesbian couple now active in the church as well as a couple other unpartnered lesbians.
5. Parkview was once a very large church but is now around one hundred fifty in membership and eighty-three in worship. The two prior pastors have called it a "dying church."
6. The prior pastor was the first woman pastor, and some in the congregation were resistant to having a woman as their pastor.
7. The prior pastor had been acting as the Co-director for the Westside Freestore. Patricia's involvement would be entirely optional.
8. The Parkview pastor must participate in the "West Side Cluster," a monthly gathering of nearby United Methodist clergy meeting for accountability and to coordinate the shared activities of their churches.
9. Parkview members should be encouraged to give more generously as they have not paid full apportionments (District and Conference "dues") in more than ten years.

The Listening/Discovery Plan

Patricia was curious about the congregation and their relationship to the community. How had they dwindled to the point of closing? What was their relationship with the community? Passively receiving visitors and gleaning information was not going to be fast enough to help her know her congregation. She devised a listening and discovery plan to learn about the congregation. Her plan consisted of:

1. Read the church's history, mission or vision statements, recent newsletters, bulletins and financial documentation.
2. Interview retired or former district superintendents to discover some of the best practices they had seen from pastors in ministry.
3. Meet with the former pastor to learn the church's strengths, weaknesses and needs.
4. Interview past and present power brokers in the community to learn its history, its dreams and its current challenges.
5. Meet immediately and regularly with the Staff Parish Relations Committee to hear feedback, if any, from the congregation.
6. Devising a set of questions, hold congregational listening and discovery meetings consisting of seven to ten persons including youth and children's groups and their leadership.
7. Open the church for community listening meetings to discover dreams, challenges, and ways to connect with ministry.
8. Lead the church to reflect on the information gathered from these meetings to discern future vision for ministry and the church's role in the community.

A first look at financial statements for Parkview showed a rapid decline in the previous few years. The church was a click away from closing its doors, and Patricia wondered how they were affording a full-time Elder. Later she discovered the church had requested part-time or retired clergy prior to her appointment.

But during the fall 2007 financial campaign, four months after Patricia's arrival, fifty-four pledging households pledged the same amount that one hundred sixty-four pledging households had pledged in 1992. Full apportionment payments were made to the District and to the Conference after more than twelve years. Worship, which had been held in the lower level during winter months for the prior four years in order to save on heating costs, was moved to the sanctuary in the hopes that combining the two worship services shortly before Patricia's arrival had reduced the amount of time the sanctuary would need to be heated and thus be more affordable. The congregation seemed to be giving courageously.

Patricia noticed that the church's vision and mission statements did not mention Jesus Christ or of the word "Christian." Its vision is: "To establish and enhance individual Spirituality within the Community of Faith in order to accomplish our mission." The mission statement reads as follows:

- Support and educate in order to develop a rich Spiritual Life
- Participate in current community ministries as well as develop new Outreach Ministries
- Expand Children's Ministries and outreach
- Extend the foundational Music Ministry into new dimensions while providing
- Nurture and care of the Faith Community.

Below the statement are Old Testament scriptures under the heading: "Biblical Basis for Ministry," and they include: Micah 6:8, Habakkuk 2:2-3 and Isaiah 61:1-4. No gospel or New Testament scriptures were cited.

Parkview had begun as a neighborhood church in the growing Westgate area of

the west side of Columbus. The Columbus District surveyed six hundred thirty-three homes in the area, and two hundred households responded with an interest in having a church that was nearby. The church held its first meeting with one hundred worshippers at the neighboring West High School on December 7, 1941, the day of the attack upon Pearl Harbor. One can only imagine the enormous effect such an event would have upon a neighborhood likely needing to gather for strength and comfort. Four months later, by Easter Sunday, the church had grown to one hundred sixty members.³

Like many new local congregations at that time, the congregation met in the basement, dug by men in the congregation who were fed by women bringing food to the site. People would compete for a seat where there wasn't a puddle. The fundraising for building an above-ground sanctuary was begun in January of 1953, the month Patricia was born. A reading of the history of the church reveals that many highly placed clergy were instrumental in the building of the church, and by 1956 there were 1006 members. The cornerstone reads "Westgate Methodist Church, 1954," but in 1968 when the Methodist Church merged with the Evangelical United Brethren Church, the nearby Westgate EUB, who had had its name longer than Westgate Methodist, changed its name to Westgate United Methodist Church, and Westgate Methodist became Parkview United Methodist Church because of its location across the street from a large park.

The merger caused the nine United Brethren and Methodist Churches within a two-mile radius to become United Methodist churches, and because of declining membership in each church, two of the churches merged. The churches, including

³History Committee, *Parkview United Methodist Church 1941-1991* (Columbus: History Committee of the 50th Anniversary Celebration Event, 1991), 2.

Parkview, have become the “West Side Cluster,” sharing Sunday evening monthly worship services preceded by potluck dinners.

Desegregation

It is said that membership once reached sixteen hundred members, but during the 1960's membership began declining. In 1979 when the Columbus City Schools lost their battle against the 1954 Supreme Court desegregation decision, busing local high school students across town caused residents to leave the Westgate/Hilltop area and consequently the church as well. Residents complained that the area was already integrated, that busing was unnecessary. Educated African Americans and middle class whites had lived together in relative harmony for generations.

The goal of Hilltop parents had long been to send their children to West High School. Locals have memories of being awakened at seven o'clock most mornings by the West High band marching up and down the streets of Westgate—and they liked it that way. To bus their children across town on what for many was a one-hour ride once all the students were picked up, was considered an injustice. “Indeed, the white majority resisted deliberate efforts throughout the planning process to effect economic as well as racial integration.”⁴

It does not appear that Parkview Church responded by urging its members or local residents to consider busing an act of justice. Many members moved to nearby Grove City, Hilliard or other parts of town where busing their children was not an issue and drove in to the church on Sunday mornings. This changed the role of the church

⁴Gregory S. Jacobs, *Getting Around Brown: Desegregation, Development and the Columbus Public Schools* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 89.

throughout the week, causing it to be more of a "Sunday" church than a neighborhood church. A review of church files does not reflect a concern to reach out to the local neighborhood to see who their new neighbors were.

The ones who stayed in Westgate had children who were old enough to be unaffected by the busing. Those people are now in their eighties and no longer live in the community either, meaning most members now drive in to the community when they come to church.

Over time, Parkview lost its prestige as a destination church where successful pastors went to enjoy their golden years before retirement. More recent pastors saw themselves as chaplains for hospice care, both for the church and for its members, and without any serious community engagement the church became more and more estranged from its neighbors. In her first ten months at Parkview, Patricia performed sixteen funerals, guiding families and the dying through the dying and grieving process, and providing follow-up care. At one time, Parkview had employed a full-time visitation pastor.

First Impressions

At a meeting with her District Superintendent shortly after coming to Parkview, Patricia inquired as to her role in such a legacy. She asked, "Is my role to fly this cannon ball back into the cannon that has been in trajectory for the last thirty years?" His response was to encourage her to do what she could.

A new appointment means inheriting the blessings and baggage of the former clergy. One surprise was that a little girl, age five, was scampering around the sanctuary,

including the chancel area, during the very traditional worship service. She is the adopted daughter of the part-time organist/secretary and her husband who sings in the choir. He is United Methodist clergy from another conference serving here in Columbus as a chaplain. The former pastor had hired both the part-time secretary and the part-time custodian, the son-in-law of an active member, a couple weeks before retiring without any input from the new pastor. The part-time organist became the part-time secretary. The former pastor had allowed the little girl to run about the sanctuary at will, and it was clear that the girl felt a certain power that she had been permitted to do so while everyone else sat powerless to stop her.

Fortunately Patricia had asked for an early meeting with the SPRC to allow for feedback from the committee appointed to listen to the congregation. Their urgent concern was the little girl scampering through the worship service and the former pastor's sanction of it despite the chaos it caused for the congregation. One of the stories they related was that the little girl had performed cartwheels down the center aisle during one of the former pastor's sermons. Patricia advised them that this was a situation the entire congregation owned. She suspected that this may have cost the congregation not only some of its regular worshippers but some of its visitors as well.

It was astounding to learn there were less than ten children in the church. Patricia hadn't thought to ask before coming how many children attended. The congregation insisted there were simply none around, despite the park across the street that appeared to be full of children in a Pentecost of diversity.

As Patricia would sit on her side porch watching youths play basketball at the park across the street, she asked God how she could reach out to them. It was not long

until Patricia felt reminded by God that she was a basketball mother, and that basketball players like nothing better than to be mothered, and none of these kids appeared to have water bottles with them or bottles of sports drinks.

Within a month of coming to Parkview, Patricia asked the congregation for coolers and powdered lemonade that she could take to the kids across the street. One of the members supplied her with an insulated two-gallon jug, and the powdered lemonade started pouring in. Patricia felt sheepish about going over there, but upon doing so she realized that there were actually a couple different groups playing basketball. She quickly chose the closest group who appeared to be Latino but unusually dressed. She had heard there was a Latino gang nearby. Pointing to the church she said, "Hi, my name is Pastor Patty. This lemonade is from the people over there at that church. There are cups in the bag attached to the handle. Help yourself, and I'll come over before dark and pick up the jug." The youths stood in stunned silence as she spoke. She did not know if it was because an Anglo was bringing them free drinks, or whether they simply couldn't speak English, or both. But when she returned all but one had left except for one waiting with the jug.

Parkview's sanctuary is very traditional, cross shaped, medium sized, with large columns and stained glass windows flanking the sides of the room. The pews and chancel furniture are light oak, and there is a communion rail with cushions for kneeling at the base of the chancel. The pulpit and lectern are raised, with two choir areas facing each other behind the pulpit and lectern, with the pipe organ behind it all on the pulpit side. The altar is the focal point along with a large stained glass window depicting Jesus Christ directly above it. A balcony seating only about thirty people is at the rear of the sanctuary

above the narthex. It also houses the sound board, and there is a lovely rose window gracing the rear of the sanctuary.

The rest of the church is quite large with several classrooms and meeting rooms, some needing updated, most needing tidied or repaired. Water damage from a leaking roof is apparent in many places in the church. A small chapel houses the closet where the diminutive choir stores robes and music and is where rehearsal takes place.

Putting her background as a classical violinist to good use, Patricia joined the choir, often just six people with elderly voices. The choir director had been employed by the church for at least a dozen years before Patricia's coming. One challenge that was clear right away is that if a visitor needed great music, Parkview would not be the place to come.

Preaching the gospel, worship and pastoral care were Patricia's priorities. She knew from experience that church members wanted two things above all—someone with great preaching skills who would also show up and pray with you when someone in your family died or when you went to the hospital.

Within the first couple weeks, Patricia began a preaching series entitled "What Are We Selling?" Not highly theological, this seemed to engage the congregation as an appropriate summer series, especially for a new pastor. The congregation heard the message, "If we're not selling Jesus, I'm in the wrong church." The church's lay leader told Patricia early on that the congregation was buzzing about how much she had preached about Jesus, remarking that no pastor in fifty years had done so.

Patricia's Calling as a Christian and as a Pastor

She remembered how hungry for Jesus she used to be. Growing up in Kettering, Ohio, she had attended confirmation classes where she learned the catechism of the Presbyterian Church, memorizing the Apostle's Creed, learning about the structure of the church and its theology. But no one ever said, "I believe in Jesus and here's why . . ." It all seemed so impersonal, that by the time she got to high school during the end of the sixties, she had not a clue who Jesus was even though she had grown up in the church. She believed in God, but Jesus was irrelevant.

It wasn't until her grandfather died towards the end of her time in college that she and her mother flew to Miami, Florida, where she met an estranged aunt who was in love with Jesus. She accepted all of Patricia's questions on the subject and began to send her books by C.S. Lewis or Corrie Ten Boom. But it was the fact that she seemed to be made of love that drew Patricia to her. She also gave Patricia a Living Bible. Starting in the New Testament, she read about people who were in love with Jesus, and by the time she got to John's gospel and the post-resurrection story where the disciples are in the boat fishing in despair, she had fallen in love with Jesus, too.

Billy Graham came to Cincinnati during that period of Bible reading, and when he invited people to come forward to make a commitment for Christ, she responded. Becoming an avid volunteer in her in-laws' church, she gave a testimony from the pulpit one Sunday. After that, she was never afraid to tell anyone about Jesus.

For twenty years she listened to Cliff Barrows, Billy Graham's music director, read the New King James Version of the Bible on cassette tapes for fifteen minutes in the morning and fifteen minutes at night. Finally, when her children were teenagers she took

a course funded by a grant to call women into non-traditional professions. Thorough testing revealed that God was redeeming all the skills and training of her life to call her into ministry.

She found a job as a Christian Education Director at Loveland United Methodist Church outside Cincinnati and began seminary soon after, challenging her theology and her faith. She entered seminary as a conservative Christian and exited as a liberal. But she felt that Jesus had saved her life in so many ways, and she became an evangelistic preacher with a social justice theology. The bedrock of her ministry was to make sure adults and children alike heard her say, "I love to follow Jesus and here's why."

So when Patricia began the ministry of listening at Parkview, it was with the certainty that her own gifts and graces interfacing with the body of Christ would be an adventure. Listening to the congregation and to the neighborhood, she had no idea just how much impact the meetings would have—on the church, on the neighborhood, and on her own identity as a pastor.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STATE OF THE ART IN THIS MINISTRY PROJECT

Review of Relevant Models

Getting to Know the Urban Congregation

In the development of a model of interviewing the congregation and the community, it was helpful to engage, or at least to review, some models where others had heard the heart of God in the voices and presence of God's people in the urban environment as a catalyst for action and transformation.

The urban environment can be a cacophony of competing issues—gangs, crime, abandoned homes, vacuums created by vacating businesses, ethnic group transition, gunfire and poor education, just to name a few. When urban voices are invited and unleashed, their prophetic power invites the church into the public square to hear a gospel of truth and to stand in solidarity with the community, helping the community to find its voice, to discover answers from within the people and, if necessary, to speak truth to power. “The prophet is not an easy person for the community to accept. It can be a trial for a community to hear the prophet's voice and acknowledge that it comes from God, since the very task of the prophet is to challenge the status quo.”¹ This chapter will review some of the methods of discovery found in personally interviewing local prophets, small group prophetic congregational discussions, and larger prophetic gatherings with

¹Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, Susan M. Ward, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 57.

the local community. In each meeting, those gathered were invited to dream beyond the status quo to listen to the heartbeat of God.

Discovery Through Interviews

Besides reading all the literature one can regarding the context church's community, a new pastor's one-on-one interviews with individuals in the community can be invaluable. Through networking, a skill that involves speaking to key people in the community who either exercise formal or informal leadership, a pastor can enter a world of story and, usually, proud remembrance of the interviewee's ownership and presence in a community.

It is first important to ask questions to discover whose voices can paint the most articulate picture of the community and its stories. These include local historians, safety personnel, TV news reporters, business owners, elected officials and "homegrown heroes," persons who grew up in the area who have attained a measure of notoriety. The interviewer may want to adhere to specific interview questions, but most interviewees have much more to say, more story to tell, than interview questions ask.

In his book *Listening and Caring Skills: a Guide for Groups and Leaders*, Dr. John Savage suggests, "Productive questions can be used in three different ways during a conversation—listening for free information, deletion, and verbal distortion."² These phenomena may appear in group discussions as well.

²John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 30.

Free information is information that wasn't in the agenda, and may even be unconscious on the part of the speaker; "the speaker will not be aware of what was told."³ Savage goes on to say, "I have become aware that free information is like a doorway into the unconscious. The speaker has unlocked the door or even put it ajar, is peeking out through it, motioning for you to come in. It is now your move, to indicate your interest in following through by asking more about that subject."⁴

In the process of interviewing people in the Hilltop community, each interviewee had some measure of nostalgia for the community that used to be. Decline and decay is common in the urban environment, but the glory of former days lives on in memory if not in reality. Their stories are rich and full as they recall moments that were not necessarily in response to the interview questions but evoked by them just the same.

African American Samuel DeWitt Proctor had a technique called "anticipating people." Recalling the pain of racism, Proctor reflects that some of his encounters with people were positive and some were negative, "and most mixed in both elements, meaning that even in the worst situation some bright light beamed. I eventually learned to enjoy anticipating people. I used my imagination and tried to understand where they were coming from. As a result, I never felt robbed taking the initiative to foster a new relationship."⁵ Interviewing can begin a relationship with someone because in "anticipating" where they're coming from, we are better and more imaginative listeners, especially when listening non-judgmentally.

³Savage, *Listening*, 30.

⁴Ibid., 31.

⁵Samuel DeWitt Proctor, *The Substance of Things Hoped For* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1995), 195.

The interviewees motion for the listener to enter into the experience of the story, giving the listener a peculiar ownership of the story, a membership into the secret of, in this case, the community being discussed. Here, the interviewee sets the agenda.⁶

Familiar streets like "Chase Ave." create visual memory because the history behind the street name is that Camp Chase was a Civil War Union camp with a prison for Confederate prisoners of war. Such history can cast a shadow of shame or pride in a community, and although it may be their shame or pride, the community owns it either way.

Savage says the second use of productive questions is to help a person fill in the missing information that comes from incomplete thoughts, known as deletion.

Deletion is a hole in the communication, a statement that is generalized and leaves out specific detail. Deletion is the brain's act of omitting specific references to facts, persons, feelings, and events that may have taken place. Through productive questions, it is possible to help a person fill in the deleted information, so that the listener and the speaker can come to awareness of what has happened or is happening.⁷

In such an instance, the interviewer asks questions like, "What exactly was the purpose of Camp Chase? How does the community feel about Camp Chase's presence on Sullivant Ave.?" Savage notes that "frequently, speakers are not aware of that which is deleted. This means that a listener's ability to ask the right questions not only gives listeners additional insights and information, but allows the speakers to become aware of that which is deleted."⁸

⁶Savage, *Listening*, 31.

⁷Ibid., 32.

⁸Ibid., 33.

Productive questions can also reveal verbal distortion when speakers use words that represent gross generalizations such as: “*every, never, always, continually, forever, every time, nobody, everyone, no one, all the time, constantly, and everywhere.*”⁹ Words like these used to reflect about an interviewee’s community may distort the interviewer’s research. Questions of clarification may lead the interviewer to more free information.

Free information, deletion and distortion, Dr. Savage notes, are positive uses of questions. Negative uses of questions include:

- Inappropriately changing the subject so that the listener does not have to deal with his/her own emotions.
- Invading private space by asking questions that are too intimate for the trust level.
- Asking loaded questions by using a sarcastic tone, making a statement but putting it in the form of a question.¹⁰

This interviewer found that people interviewed were delighted to be interviewed and to be asked questions that caused them to journey back through the past, present and future of the community and to create responses that communicated their concerns and reflected their attachment to the community.

Small Group Discovery with the Congregation

In the small group discovery process, the culture of the church becomes better defined. “Congregations . . . are subcultures within a larger culture. They have distinct identities that can be seen in what they make and do together. One of the perspectives one

⁹Savage, *Listening*, 35.

¹⁰Ibid., 37.

can bring to the study of a congregation, then, is that of the student of culture who looks for the everyday patterns of life that make each congregation itself, that give it its identity." What symbols and signals and conventions define Parkview's culture and identity?¹¹ Communion, regular worship attendance, traditional style of worship, knowing when to stand and sit, ownership of volunteer positions, volunteering at the Food Pantry and Freestore, and sharing stories in Sunday School were a few of the more obvious symbols, signals and conventions that define Parkview's identity. But further discovery beckoned Patricia to dig deeper.

Methodist Theological School in Ohio professor Dr. Lisa Withrow, one of Patricia's Professional Associates¹², believes there is a way to develop an ethic of inquiry as the church mobilizes for discussion and discovery:

An ethic of inquiry involves an atmosphere of ongoing questioning, a search for meaning and truth in sacred texts, traditions, experiences and knowledge. This ethic fosters curiosity in terms of experience and theology. Inquiry invites movement from a universal truth as claimed by modern church theology to truths claimed by postmodern theologies: truth of context.¹³

It was in a quest for the identity of the new context, Parkview, that Patricia asked the Pastor Parish Relations Committee to set up small groups that would gather once in peoples' homes to reflect on and discuss the church in the presence of its people.

In order to meet as many people as possible in the shortest period of time, Patricia met with small groups within the congregation every Sunday evening for eight weeks to

¹¹Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney, eds. *Studying Congregations: a New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 78.

¹²The role of the Professional Associates is to lend specific expertise to the research project.

¹³Lisa Withrow, "An Ethic of Inquiry for the Future Church," *Journal of Theology CVV* (Summer 2006): 85.

discern the best stories and dreams of Parkview's people. She began the process, loosely following the "Appreciative Inquiry (AI)" method:

- (1) choose the positive as the focus of inquiry;
- (2) inquire into stories of life-giving forces;
- (3) locate themes that appear in the stories and select topics for further inquiry;
- (4) create shared images for a preferred future; and
- (5) find innovative ways to create that future.¹⁴

"Believing that human social systems move toward positive images, this approach focuses 'on the generative and creative images that can be held up, valued, and used as a basis for moving toward the future.'"¹⁵ Patricia used a Bible story from Luke's gospel, Chapter Three, about John the Baptist as a centering piece, the positive image, about people coming from the cities asking John the Baptist what to do.

The gatherings were so enjoyable that it would have been appropriate to call them "appreciative inquiry" even if the method hadn't been followed. "AI provides an organization-wide mode for initiating and discerning narratives and practices that are generative (creative and life giving). Then AI guides and nourishes ('reconstructs') the organization along the line of its best stories."¹⁶ Stories like the digging of the church's basement and the women who brought food to feed the workers generated a good deal of nodding and laughter from the oldest members who remember the hole and the digging.

Questions like, "What are the essential ministries at Parkview?" caused members

¹⁴Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 67.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, xi.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 19.

to respond quite thoughtfully and proudly. The goal of AI is “to change the conversation—to stimulate the thinking and the imagination of congregations—through a process that focuses upon the honorable, the pure, the pleasing, the commendable¹⁷ to effect “long-term change in congregational habits, the formation of new habits that arise from an attitude of focusing on the positive.”¹⁸ It is often our habit to focus on the negative aspects of organizations in order to effect change. “Appreciative Inquiry is built on theories that move a congregation away from deficit-based models toward the images and forces that are most life-giving.”¹⁹

For a pastor just getting to know a congregation, this method so emphasizes the positive that that which is good is affirmed. With such a friendly method, an inquiring pastor would seem quite optimistic about the qualities of a church, possibly deflecting concerns that “the new pastor has new ideas.” Indeed, Patricia found this method to be helpful in the small group setting particularly because she did not realize how close the church was to closing its doors at the time of her arrival. Since doom and gloom had characterized a good deal of church business for a number of years, the congregation no doubt welcomed the emphasis on the positive, although a couple probing questions about behaviors seemed appropriate to include.

Patricia found that in meeting with the small groups within the congregation, she not only got to know many of the names of the people who came, but everyone gathered in homes that hadn’t been used for such gatherings for many years. The homes and the hospitality offered therein are often overlooked as resources for the church, particularly

¹⁷Branson, *Memories*, ix.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, xi.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 39.

in mainline denominations where “home church” is less prevalent. The focus is more concentrated on the church building itself.

As they discussed the ministries of the church, particularly the outreach ministries such as the food pantry and the Freestore volunteering, it seemed to Patricia that much volunteer energy was being expended by people who are quite rich in years.

“Appreciative Inquiry assumes that all organizations have significant life forces, and these forces are available in stories and imaginations. Further, by bringing these resources into the organization’s conversations and planning, major changes can be implemented.”²⁰ Simply remembering former ministries caused the members to recommend new ones.

The intimacy of crowding groups into members’ dining rooms and living areas created its own synergy, its own community, as church members remembered some of the church’s best stories.

Thus, there is a need for an inquiring church where participants are encouraged to exegete their communities, theologically reflect on their experiences and create a vision about what caring relationships might look like in these contexts. Conversation about such matters leads to generative development of community, evoking a process of informed, self-aware enthusiasm for ministry that both adapts to context and remains prophetic with a radical message of love.²¹

Indeed, there was an increased energy in the church during the eight weeks of meetings with the congregation. People wanted to know who had attended whose meeting and what was said. More will be discussed regarding the results of these meetings in Chapter Four, but it is important to note that the energy created by meeting

²⁰Branson, *Memories*, 23.

²¹Withrow, “Ethic of Inquiry,” 90.

with the small groups was so enjoyed by the congregation that it created a desire to do it again. "Living new life means living with a series of critiquing traditions, letting go of those pieces that do not invite openness, living in spaces of chaos and transformation, spiraling closer to God each time. This way, congregations can claim a new understanding of church growth, the pursuit of new life."²² Four months later Patricia invited the congregation to the parsonage during Advent to learn and discuss Christmas in foreign lands. There were many who came for these evenings, some saying that they had never been in the parsonage. They crowded into her living room, enjoying the crowding, listening and singing and enjoying old friends.

Appreciative Inquiry is a kind of celebration of all things positive about the organization being studied. There is a significant downside to Appreciative Inquiry. When a situation is quite negative, deliberately positive discussions can seem quite Pollyannaish. If a church is ready to close its doors and the discussion is completely positive, the issues causing such a reality may never be named. The results of the research could be quite skewed, while everyone's impressions of the discussions may be that they were irrelevant since they did not speak to the church's reality.

Though not all of her questions were positive, Patricia wished she had known just how negative previous discussions of the church's financial situation had been. In the long run, the positive small group discussions were highly informative about Patricia's new context, and the congregation was glad to have been asked.

²²Withrow, "Ethic of Inquiry," 92.

The Birth of the Community Outreach Team (Context Associates)

Patricia's experience on Columbus' Near East Side project from her Bexley context had proven that some grassroots gatherings at an urban church had given her invaluable insight into the community. Patricia's hope was to invite the local community into the church for at least three meetings to hear the community's stories and their issues. Patricia's first drive up Sullivant Ave. was a memory of a large group of men being arrested outside the Freestore a couple blocks from the church. A map of local gunfire reports shows that the Hilltop area surrounding the church's small community of Westgate can expose God's people to some dangerous situations. Evidence of drug deals and prostitution on the streets, people lined up outside food pantries and frequent emergency vehicle sirens suggested that people coming to the meetings might have many issues to express.

Although the model of Appreciative Inquiry had guided the small group process to highlight the best stories of the church, it was clear that persons coming to the church from the larger community may have many issues, even stories of oppression. Insisting on highlighting only the positive would silence what needs voicing. "Any theology of public life must confront public conflict and the pain it produces. And such a theology must point to the promise of Christian faith: that when we respond to conflict with compassion, even on the cross, we will be resurrected and given new life."²³

Most of Parkview's experience in inviting the community was through "baked steak" and "ham loaf" dinners, selling tickets to raise funds for paying apportionment

²³Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1981), 106-107.

fees to the denomination. Selling grassroots meetings might require a different approach.

Patricia preached a sermon called "The Inside-Out Church" (see Appendix B)

seeking to build "a hunger for the public." Parker Palmer casts a vision for that hunger:

But a vision of "the public" is not enough, and exhortation will not bring that vision into being. We need a living process to experience ourselves as a public, a process suggested by the phrase "a public life." In such a life, strangers come in daily contact, grow accustomed to each other, learn to solve the problems which the common life poses, enrich and expand each other's lives. My interest, then, is not simply in the static concept of the public but in the dynamic process known as public life. It is a process which brings us out of ourselves into an awareness of our connectedness, an awareness which is especially pronounced at moments of high public drama."²⁴

A phenomenon of "instant community" grew in American communities around the attacks on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in 2001.

Shared truth about a community can be a powerful bonding agent when voices are invited to speak their truth.

Patricia gathered a group of "context associates" to begin a process of inviting people to come and express themselves about the community. These context associates came as a result of prayer and God's genius, and were empowered to accomplish astonishing work. All regulars at the church, the Context Associates consisted of:

1. A small business owner who lives in Westgate just up the street from the church. Gentle and funny with superior hospitality skills, he was the encourager and cheerleader in the group, and it was helpful that he knows so many people in the community. He facilitated the crime and safety affinity group. He is the kind of Christian who can share his faith openly to the congregation.
2. A former high school principal and football coach who now serves the State of Ohio Board of Education. He led the education affinity group and was the facilitator for all four meetings. His experience in this type of work made him a good facilitator and a great representative of the church. He privately expressed

²⁴Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 20.

some discomfort at facilitating the meetings since his was one of the families who had moved out of Westgate when desegregation began. But his involvement with the church, the Freestore and local fundraising efforts prove his continued interest in the Hilltop and therefore qualified him as an enthusiastic facilitator. He is a Catholic who attends the church with his wife who has been a member since she was a toddler. His faith is deep and privately held.

3. A school counselor for the Columbus City Schools who serves schools on the Hilltop, the same young woman who survived a drive-by shooting six months prior to the first meeting. She was instrumental in the publication of the directory of Hilltop area civic groups and commissions. Community development is truly a passion for her, and she is as well informed about state and local issues as a much older adult who would be a major political candidate. She and her husband, named below, tirelessly attended every Hilltop civic meeting for months. Together they helped to purchase the power wash equipment and provided leadership for the TAG Team graffiti removal squad. She and her husband seem to have a deep and inquiring faith.
4. An architect who provided enormous feedback about the role of the other civic groups so that whatever action the committee took, they would feel some level of comfort that the work was not being duplicated by another agency. His expertise in architecture was critical in putting together the community development agenda. He is the husband of the teacher above. They are a young couple who were married in the church and joined it as one of the only couples in their age group.
5. The pastor. Besides casting a vision for the project with the Context Associates, she welcomed the community and cast a vision at each meeting. She also obtained from the Columbus Police the local crime statistics for the last two years. The group distributed this information by email to community meeting informants.

The group requested recognition from Parkview's Church Council as the "Community Outreach Team," made a presentation of their plan to invite the community into the church, asked for help with hospitality and were welcomed into the ministries of the church. From their study of Appreciative Inquiry, they embraced dwelling on the positives as a model for forming questions, understanding that negative issues would need to be voiced; but they wanted to avoid a deficit mindset. Consequently, they loosely followed the model of Asset Mapping in order to organize the process, although they did not formally study or adhere to the method.

Focusing on the Positive – Capacity Orientation

Like Appreciative Inquiry, Asset Mapping is, again, asset focused instead of needs focused. On the Hilltop, the stories of past glories, especially of “West High” have become almost mythical in their telling. Mocking present realities, those memories are a source of pride. On the Hilltop few things in the present seems to be worthy of pride or acclaim. Crime is prevalent, businesses are vacating and leaving eyesores, and there are five gangs operating on the Hilltop. West High has become their alleged breeding ground.

But Asset Mapping appreciates that wherever there are human beings, there are untapped resources, gifts of genius and skills. Rather than being focused on deficit, Asset Mapping is capacity-oriented. It assumes:

1. All the historic evidence indicates that significant community development takes place only when local community people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort.
2. The prospect of outside help is bleak indeed. It is unlikely that significant new inputs of federal money will be forthcoming soon.
3. Even the poorest neighborhood is a place where individuals and organizations represent resources upon which to rebuild.
4. The key to neighborhood regeneration, then, is to locate all of the available local assets, to begin connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness, and to begin harnessing those local institutions that are not yet available for local development purposes.²⁵

In Asset Mapping, the glass is half full instead of half empty. With a couple loaves and fishes, Jesus fed thousands of people with minimal resources. Deficit mentality drives people apart, but capacity-based mentality draws people together.

²⁵John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 1993), 5-6.

Gathering the community to celebrate its assets validates the community's gifts and gives people confidence and hope that good things can be accomplished:

If a community development process is to be asset-based and internally focused, then it will be in very important ways "relationship driven." Thus, one of the central challenges for asset-based community developers is to constantly build and rebuild the relationships between and among local residents, local associations and local institutions.²⁶

In the community meetings at Parkview, it was exciting to see the synergy of local politicians, local business representatives and residents intermingling, presenting points of view, and rebuilding relationships.

One of the greatest works of the Community Outreach Team was to identify and document all the different civic and interest groups in the Hilltop community. Each participant was given a list, or as Kretzmann and McKnight refer to it, "Neighborhood Map"²⁷ of these groups, where and when they meet, whom to contact to join or volunteer, and a phone number or email address. The neighborhood map served three purposes. First, it identified the organizational assets of the community, concretizing the concept that the assets are plentiful. Second, it organized the groups to identify opportunities for ministry where gaps were evident. Third, it linked the local residents to the agencies for further relationship building.

The Asset Mapping model encourages businesses of all types even if it is babysitting or selling perfume to neighbors. Every money-making activity is of interest. "This is because most small businesses grow step-by-step and often, the most important

²⁶Kretzmann and McKnight, *Building Communities*, 9.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 110.

step is the first one—the sale of any goods or services.”²⁸ This understanding is a challenge to a community that has lost major business institutions in the area such as Meijer and Delphi (General Motors). These businesses provide residents with income, shopping and a sense of importance. The businesses replacing them are trailers selling tacos, car washes, used car dealers and payday advance businesses, and many feel these businesses are less important than the large anchor stores that once filled the local mall.

One very positive tenet of Asset Mapping is the value it places upon local youth and their potential participation in community projects. Because they are more confined to the neighborhoods in which they live rather than leaving them during the day, they are seen as having a larger stake in the welfare of the community.²⁹ This is particularly hope-bearing because youth are often seen as community terrorists, often becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy and thereby misdirected and marginalized. But youth have fresh enthusiasm and energy and enormous potential as tutors, mentors and even as entrepreneurs.³⁰

In fact, Asset Mapping also values senior citizens as assets, disabled persons as assets, welfare recipients as assets. “Development is creating a new link between two or more existing assets.”³¹ Asset Mapping strengthens partnerships between local businesses and these individuals so that all gifts in the community are valued.

Churches are also mapped in this model as partnering with public institutions such as hospitals, community colleges and libraries as well as individuals, including youth,

²⁸Kretzmann and McKnight, *Building Communities*, 15-16.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 30.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 31.

³¹Luther K. Snow, *The Power of Asset Mapping* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 17.

businesses in the private sector and associates in the public sector.³² This is an optimistic endeavor because the church does not always see itself linked to businesses or colleges. It is exciting to think how relevant the church might become if each church in this country found connections to businesses and colleges.

Other assets include parks, cultural organizations, schools, colleges, banks and credit institutions and even police. All these groups work together to rebuild the community's economy by buying locally whenever possible, encouraging entrepreneurs whenever possible by offering abandoned or underutilized space along with loans and grants. "Your gain is my gain is our gain. When we map our assets we find the grace *between* our gifts."³³

Asset Mapping gives us five steps toward whole community mobilization:

1. Mapping completely the capacities and assets of individuals, citizens' associations and local institutions.
2. Building relationships among local assets for mutually beneficial problem-solving within the community.
3. Mobilizing the community's assets fully for economic development and information sharing purposes.
4. Convening as broadly representative a group as possible for the purposes of building a community vision and plan.
5. Leveraging activities, investments and resources from outside the community to support asset-based, locally-defined development.³⁴

³² Kretzmann and McKnight, *Building Communities*, 143-160.

³³ Snow, *Asset Mapping*, 12.

³⁴ Kretzmann and McKnight, *Building Communities*, 345.

This is a wonderful model with one exception—leadership. Without leadership and coordination, the issue becomes, “how does each group communicate with other groups?”

The Parkview context associates, Community Outreach, found that even though there were a plethora of groups and assets, there were few groups actually functioning to their potential, and the lack of action had created a void of leadership. The community began to point to the church as the leadership simply because it seemed to be the only interested party, and the Community Outreach Team balked at the authority placed on it. The group continues to seek its true purpose following an exhausting season of community meetings.

A biblical model of church and community salvation through evangelism, radical hospitality and community listening and outreach is offered by Norman Thomas, a United Theological Seminary professor in Dayton, Ohio, who speaks of his home church, Fairview, which once served “a homogeneous white neighborhood in northwest Dayton, Ohio.”

Most members were homeowners living within two miles of the building. They prided themselves on being a *family* church and a *friendly* church. Then came busing for integration of schools and increasing white flight to the suburbs. Today Fairview, my home church, has many new neighbors. A majority are African Americans; others are whites from rural Appalachia. Many rent houses formerly owned by Fairview members and neighbors. Some are clients of Fairview’s community outreach programs—thrift shop, food pantry, before- and after- school care, and the weekend Sunshine Club for children. Meanwhile, most members commute four to eight miles from the suburbs to their family church. They refer with affection to Fairview as “our” church and call it “a place to feel at home.” Many local neighbors shop at the busy drive-in and drug store across the street. Others catch the bus

to downtown Dayton at the corner. Many children walk past on their way to and from school. Only a few come for Sunday school, or their parents for worship. Very few neighbors call Fairview their “home church.”³⁵

The community is equally diverse around Parkview, and what used to be a “neighborhood” church no longer serves the neighborhood. In fact as previously noted, few members actually live in the Westgate neighborhood, and most drive in from various communities further out from the city. The difficulty with such a fellowship is how to effect a plan that not only engages the community but engages the congregation’s members as well. Thomas’ solution for this dilemma is what he calls the “Antioch Model” found in Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3 where the Antioch church, surrounded by diversity, built a strong and vital church:

¹⁹ Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. ²² News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. ²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they associated with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians’.

²⁷ At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

²⁸ One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this

³⁵Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, eds., *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context, The Church at Antioch: Crossing Racial, Cultural, and Class Barriers*, by Norman E. Thomas (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 144.

took place during the reign of Claudius.²⁹ The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea;³⁰ this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

¹³Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul.² While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

In this scripture, Dr. Thomas sees a model for energizing the urban church today through:

1. Evangelism through lay leadership—evangelizing with power in the city streets.
2. Every member a minister—each member has a ministry and is a witness for the Lord.
3. Care for new believers—Paul and Barnabas trained new believers and grounded them in the faith.
4. Witness to oneness in Christ—forsaking divisions within Christianity such as denominationalism, concentrating instead on their identity in Christ.
5. Compassion for the poor—each person giving according to his or her ability.
6. Balanced leadership—a balance of evangelistic proclamation and thorough instruction.
7. Elimination of racial and ethnic barriers—overcoming differences through table fellowship.
8. Mission for others—the church looking beyond itself to mission.

Dr. Thomas' church, Fairview, began to engage with this model, creating a ministry where single mothers could learn skills like financial planning, computer use, job interviewing and parenting—ultimately leading to active church membership.³⁶

³⁶Gallagher and Hertig, *Mission in Acts*, 154.

For a congregation engaging in a listening and discovery ministry to the community, the Antioch model seems like a viable model, as the church discerns the community's needs and responds to them in compassion, presence, witness and love. Though this model was not used in Pastor Cook's project, it would be a model she would want to keep in mind at her next appointment.

The next chapter is an exploration of the theoretical, biblical, historical and theological foundations of the Parkview project.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter explores the biblical, theoretical, historical and theological foundations of the project of listening to the Parkview Church and to the community. During the implementation of the project Patricia drew inspiration and courage from the biblical foundation because it became so prophetic to the project.

Biblical Foundation

When choosing a biblical text, Patricia prayed for the grace to discern a passage that would speak to the problem of discovering a congregation as it discovers its neighborhood. Luke 3:1-18 was the text Patricia discerned. The major question of the passage was, “What shall we do?” The question intrigued Patricia because it’s such an open-ended question. But at each small group congregational gathering, Patricia would open with a reading of this passage and found herself questioning if this was an appropriate text for the project. It seemed to her that a slightly more relevant passage could have been used at these gatherings. But more than once, that question or a similar question was raised at the gatherings. Later when the congregation opened the doors to the community and people came asking, “What shall we do?” Patricia found the scripture passage to be not only relevant but profoundly prophetic as the project progressed. When the wisdom of culture comes to an end of itself in urban decay and blight, “What shall we do?” is the question that Patricia found even political leaders ask.

Reading the Luke text with this question in mind, let the reader be inspired by God's wisdom in selecting the Luke text.

Luke 3:1-18

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '

⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

⁹Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' ¹¹In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' ¹²Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' ¹³He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from

anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.¹

John the Baptist as a Symbol of the Church

In Chapter 3 of Luke's gospel, John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness, filled with the word of God and powered by the Holy Spirit. The "word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness" (3:2). The Lukan writer's intention was to depict John as a prophet in the tradition of Isaiah (38:4), Jeremiah (1:2, 13:3) and Jonah (1:1) as "the word of God came" to these prophets as well.² Luke's phrase in 3:2, 'The word of God came,' is evidence of Luke's theocentrism. The source of inspiration behind John's work emphasizing God as the story's primary actor will be carried forward and enlarged.³

The first two verses of Luke 3 depict the earthly kingdom where familiar scriptural and historical names are in power: the Emperor Tiberius was on the throne, Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was the ruler of Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler of the region of Ituraea, and Annas and Caiaphas were high priests (3:2). This

¹ Biblical quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from *The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989.

² Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 163.

³ *Ibid.*, 160.

overwhelming conclave of power implies great cities and thrones with flags and horses, golden chariots and armored marching armies, conquered peoples and the deep poverty that political oppression brings. Luke contrasts this might with the dramatic simplicity of "the word of God [coming] to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness" (v. 2). No fancy palaces, paved Roman roads, royal robes or bejeweled crowns are mentioned there. No trumpets or noisy cymbals announced his presence. In its simplicity, the scripture tunes our ears to one voice--John was preaching "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 3) near the waters of the Jordan River so that "all flesh [may] see the salvation of God" (v. 6).

"The wilderness is reminiscent of the formative event in Israel's life as a nation, the exodus, and biblical and extrabiblical tradition came to associate the wilderness with a new exodus. This tradition encourages an association of John's prophetic ministry with eschatological deliverance and portrays the power of 3:1-2a as those from whom God's people would be delivered," as John's own father had prophesied in the first chapter of Luke. "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins" (1:76-77).⁴

John is also depicted here as a "renewal prophet." "Josephus speaks of a number of renewal prophets, such as those during the rule of Felix (52-60C.E.) who led the masses ' . . . out into the wilderness so that God would show them signs of deliverance.' Also adding to the portrayal of John as a renewal prophet is Luke's interpretation of John's appearance with the citation of Isaiah 40:3-5, suggesting that the promised

⁴ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 169-170.

eschatological deliverance of God's people was imminent."⁵ It is tempting to point the Isaiah citation towards Jesus' baptism, but there is an element of eschatological deliverance in John's baptism of the people who came from the city, because baptism is a pouring out of God's grace upon those being baptized.

Who was John baptizing? Verse 7 says the crowds "came out" to be baptized by him, implying that they came from the cities ruled by the rich and powerful. The parallel passage of Matthew 3:7 reports "many Pharisees and Sadducees [came] for baptism."

Mark 1, from which both Luke and Matthew are derived, says "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the river Jordan" (v. 5). "John's proclamation ensures that his baptism is understood as an assault on the status quo, that to participate in his baptism is to embrace behaviors rooted in a radical realignment with God's purpose."⁶ Perhaps with tongue in cheek, the Lukan writer says "with many exhortations" John preaches the good news. One of his "exhortations" is that he calls the people a "brood of vipers." "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (v. 7)

William Barclay translates "brood" as *spawn* and notes, "John had lived in the desert. The face of the desert was covered with stubble and brushwood, as dry as tinder. Sometimes a spark set the face of the desert alight and out from their crannies came the vipers, scurrying in terror from the menacing flames. It was to them John likened the people who came to be baptized."⁷ "The relation between the snake and the devil is

⁵ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 163.

⁶ Ibid., 173.

⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 33.

suggestive (cf. Rev 12:9 et al.), particularly since Luke has already begun to portray the fundamental conflict in his narrative as between two forces, light (related to God and Jesus—cf. 1:78-79; 2:8-9) and darkness (to be identified with Satan)."⁸

John's prescription for their condition is that they might "bear fruits worthy of repentance" rather than being spiritually prideful about being "church folks," the children of Abraham (v. 8).

According to Luke, John's baptism was a call for repentance and for behavior that demonstrates repentance. John's primary interest is in calling people out of normal social existence in order to align themselves fundamentally with God's eschatological, redemptive purpose. By submitting to repentance-baptism they surrendered themselves to God's aim, distancing themselves from past ways of life apart from God's purpose, professing their (re)new(ed) allegiance to his will.⁹

John paints a powerful image, warning that "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees;" (3:9). For "even now" "Luke employs both *δε* *και* for added emphasis, and *ηδη* to score this point."¹⁰ "Even now is prophetic to today's urban reality. "Even now" there is gunfire in our cities. "Even now" there are hungry or abused children in our cities. The emphasis is not on what could or will happen. The emphasis is on the present—which is a crisis. We do not know all the crises that drew the people from the cities, only that the solution of the day wasn't working for them. "For John, the urgency

⁸ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 175.

⁹ Ibid., 164.

¹⁰ Ibid., 175.

of the moment . . . allows for no leisure in this matter; people must act 'at once' to manifest their realignment of loyalties around God's purpose in concrete ways."¹¹ To the people who "came out" from the cities of power to hear God's anointed preacher, John must have been a dramatically different voice. For them to have "come out" from the cities to the wilderness, something must have been critically wrong in the cities, and whatever leadership was there was not enough to meet their needs. "John is thus situated squarely in the midst of social turmoil with profound economic, political, and religious implications. Indeed, the prophetic movements with which he shares affinity were themselves concerned with the quest for deliverance from oppression."¹²

The people who came to John were human beings with human problems. They were oppressors and oppressed, sinners and broken ones. The tax collectors "were involved in despised occupations."¹³ There were "sick people who could not fulfill the duties of the law."¹⁴

The religious leaders [of Jesus' time] called most poor and powerless people "sinners" because poverty prevented them from observing the Sabbath or the law of purification. The 'am ha'aretz (the "people of the land") were the uneducated and the ignorant, those whose lack of religious knowledge and moral practice stood in the way of their salvation.¹⁵

¹¹ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 175.

¹² Ibid., 163.

¹³ Andrew Sung Park, *From Hurt to Healing: a Theology of the Wounded* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 23.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Dr. Andrew Sung Park's work on *han*, is prophetic to the people Luke was addressing. Dr. Park defines *han* as "*internalized collective memory of victims* generated by patriarchal tyranny, racial discrimination, economic exploitation, ethnic cleansing, massacre, foreign occupation, state-sponsored terrorism, and unjust war."¹⁶ His definition characterizes some of the people who would have come to John for baptism. Park laments,

These so-called sinners needed solace, healing, and liberation, not repentance. Jesus used all his means, including miracles, to heal the wounded of their suffering, oppression, and affliction. Contrary to the theology that is basically concerned with the guilt and salvation of sinners, Jesus' teaching centered on comforting the sinned-against, healing the wounded, giving voice to the voiceless, and liberating them from their *han* while confronting the oppressor. Jesus was the friend of the *han*-ridden.¹⁷

The crowds don't seem to mind John's chastisement, nor do they seem to grasp the significance of what John is calling them to be. They only know they are in the presence of someone uncorrupted by the city and who appears to be living an ascetic and holy life. The city dwellers ask the man of God, "'What then should we do?'" What's the cure for being a brood of vipers?

John does not cast an apocalyptic vision about God's intervention but rather casts the onus of responsibility on them to create the kingdom of God. "'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise'" (v. 11). The city solution was that "Jerusalem had to be retaken by a nonviolent messiah rather than by a violent revolution, and the temple ritual had to empower justice rather

¹⁶ Park, *Hurt to Healing*, 15.

¹⁷ Ibid., 24.

than excuse one from it."¹⁸ Even those who do not create domination systems can participate in them, thereby willingly or unwillingly supporting the system.

The Lukan writer then seems surprised about the next group to come to John with the same question. Luke says "'even' tax collectors came to be baptized and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?'" (v. 12) "Both verbs (διασεισητε and συκοφαντησητε) involve extortion."¹⁹ "... Beginning in 6CE, the temple and temple authorities were also the center of the imperial tax system. They had the responsibility for collecting and paying the annual tribute due to Rome. Also, as the economic center of the domination system, records of debt were stored in the temple."²⁰

Despite the list of mighty leaders at the beginning of the chapter, there again must have been a vacuum of leadership in the cities, because even government-paid temple workers were asking John what to do. John replies with the most obvious answer to corruption: "'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you'" (v. 13). The implication is that the tax collectors were collecting more taxes than what was required and skimming off the top for themselves.

When money and unaccountable power come together, there is often corruption, and there is no indication in Luke that the tax collectors tried to deny it. "John's ethical message contains within it a social critique the profundity of which is appreciated only when it is recognized that it not only points the finger of judgment at large-scale injustice but in fact reaches into the realities of day-to-day existence. Life at the local level and

¹⁸ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 53.

¹⁹ John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 35a* (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 150.

²⁰ Borg and Crossan, *Last Week*, 18.

one's own normal network of relationships are touched by this ethical vision, with the result that 'repentance' must be understood within and related to even the most mundane."²¹ God's people can be both oppressed and oppressing.

Then soldiers come to ask John the same question: "And we, what should we do?" (v. 14) Were the soldiers tired of working for the emperor or governor? Were they oppressed themselves by regimes that forced them to extort money from people? John simply tells them not to "extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages" (v. 14). In other words, as part of a corrupt government, the soldiers could at least protect the weak and spread justice, for the people seemed to have no one who could advocate for them. Even "the temple authorities did not represent the Jews. Rather than representing the Jewish people, they were, as local collaborators with imperial authority, the oppressors of the vast majority of the Jewish people."²²

First, it is remarkable that groups of people from the cities came to a man of God with no apparent experience in public administration or city planning or human psychology to glean answers for problems they could not solve. The wilderness became full of people and therefore a "public square" where the powers came to the prophet, where the prophet spoke truth to power in eloquent simplicity, exhorting people to do the right thing, to do justice.

Second, it is striking that the "fruits worthy of repentance" are not church activities. From the personal piety experienced in a baptism of repentance and water, an outward sign of an inner grace, John recommends the social piety and justice of sharing

²¹ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 174.

²² Borg and Crossan, *Last Week*, 123.

with those in need, not overcharging people, and not extorting them through the abuse of power.

The scripture does not say that John refused to baptize the city seekers; nor does it say that they insisted on being baptized. But the inference is that John welcomed them into baptism with heavenly hospitality even as he spoke truth to them.

It is significant that the dream of God in verses 4 through 6, quoted from Isaiah 40:3-5, anticipates a new reality that we are charged with implementing. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." God's people are charged to make the Lord's paths straight, and the easiest way to arrive anywhere is as the crow flies. But that is not usually the reality. Mountains and valleys and the crooked and the rough obstruct the view and the journey. Here, scripture says that making them all disappear is a part of our responsibility on the journey if we expect to truly see the "way of the Lord" and "the salvation of God."

Jeremiah 28:7 says, "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." As frustrating and utopian as this seems, even in John's world of corruption, is it still a reality worth being beheaded or crucified for? For the salvation to which Isaiah the prophet points, and to which, as contemporary urban prophets, we are called to point, is not just a future, eschatological reality saved for heaven. Salvation is at hand here on earth, as we respond to "the voice of one crying out" in the wilderness of poverty and

gunfire and crime, of deportation and separation of families, of homicide in our schools, and mass murders in our universities. Jesus said, "For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Mt. 17:20-21).

The church should be an arena where social change is part of the ethic.

Lamenting the racism that plagued his people and his life Samuel DeWitt Proctor wrote, "During my darkest hours, I never believed that God had vanished, or that the moral order of the universe was less reliable than the physical order. I believed that justice had its own inherent validity. I believed that change would come if we continued to work at it. Believing these things, I went to church where we celebrated social change as though it were reality."²³ Celebrating "social change as if it were reality" anticipates the reign of God, creates it and gives us a glimpse of the heart of God when we experience redemption in our streets.

For Parkview UMC, a day of repentance will be needed, of "turning around" the life of the church. As John the Baptist says, "the ax is aimed at the foot of tree," and the church is a click away from closing its doors. Much of Parkview has already been cut down and thrown into the fire of mainline denominational decline. "What should we do?" is on peoples' lips. How can the church be prophetic to the world if it cannot save itself?

Returning to Luke's gospel, the people came to John the Baptist with "expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah" (v. 16). But the prophet is only the truth teller who diagnoses the social disease and calls the world to turn its life around. John points to the Messiah who will

²³ Samuel DeWitt Proctor, *The Substance of Things Hoped For* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1995), 140.

baptize us not with water alone but with the fire of the Holy Spirit (v. 16). Luke tells us more about the Holy Spirit and fire in Chapter Two of Acts where the fire of Pentecost allows people to hear the gospel in words they can understand.

Some will say that the church should not tread on political territory, that it runs the risk of “spiritual politics.”²⁴ Parker Palmer says that he would not “breach the ‘wall of separation’ between church and state but would insist that a healthy state, a healthy political process, is grounded in a healthy public life, and that the church can do much to nurture that life without attempting to seize political power.”²⁵ No, the Parkview meetings were more about speaking to political power than about seizing it.

With Pastor Cook’s more informed leadership through interviews and meetings, it will be the Parkview congregation’s task to turn its life around through repentance, through deep listening and engagement with the community, and through the discernment of the Holy Spirit. By looking to the welfare of the community, together they can then address the most pressing needs of the community and discern their calling to them. “If we are able to love the world, that will be the best demonstration of the truth which the church has been given.”²⁶

²⁴ Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America’s Public Life* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1981), 86.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 87.

Theoretical Foundation

Parkview's State of Affairs and the Challenge of Setting Up Community Meetings

In early 2007 Parkview UMC completed five years of working on its vision and mission statement (see Chapter 1), devised by a committee under the supervision of its former pastor. There is little intentionality towards community outreach in the statements, so setting up community meetings in a church that has for so long been disengaged with the community creates a challenge.

Internally, work on mission statements can create the atmosphere for spiritual discernment and theological conversation with a view to the future; however, many leaders find themselves frustrated again with the lack of follow-through when work on mission statements themselves comes to completion. The search for another method or program resurfaces in a cycle of anxiety, or worse, church-wide depression results.²⁷ With the church doors close to closing, there is a lot of blaming going on and plenty of fearful talk about what might happen. If the doors close, who will inherit the Parkview church and its parsonage after these same people have paid the bills for so long? How will the congregation continue to gather to see each other? Where will the remainder go for worship?

Upon her July 2007 arrival at Parkview the new pastor gathered members for eight Sunday evening gatherings for small group discussion about the church. Many people reflected on the effects of desegregation on the community and on the congregation, connecting the sudden drop in attendance and membership to the rapid

²⁷ Lisa Withrow, "An Ethic of Inquiry for the Future Church," *Journal of Theology CVV* (Summer 2006): 82.

departure of families from the community in order to avoid having their children bused across town. Some blamed pastors for the departure of certain members, and some blamed certain behaviors within the congregation.

The threat of closing the doors and the fear of the treasury dipping below zero, the number of faithful donors having recently died—all these cast not only a growing grief in the congregation that old friends are missing but also that there is no one to replace the donation that the deceased gave. In the final analysis of the church's health, the thermometer always seems to point to the dismal financial situation.

Sadly, even as new families have moved into the community, the church seems to have continued its traditions without a large amount of interest in the newer residents and their needs. The rummage sales, the ham loaf, bean and baked steak dinners, and Sunday School and Sunday worship services have been the mainstay of the life of the church almost since its inception. The survivors of the decline in attendance, now at 80 for Sunday worship, remember joining fifty or fifty-five years ago. They know each other so well that they become family to each other each time they walk through the doors. They reminisce about the glory days when the church was a vital congregation of worshippers, when community involvement meant that the community came to the church. The only exception was a door-to-door visitation by a couple members. It is from this wilderness of grief and confusion that members are asking, "What shall we do?"

Sadly, the church has looked inward for its community.

The ultimate irony in our obsessive pursuit of private life is that no matter how successful such pursuit may be, the human need for a common life, for community, remains powerfully alive; but in a privatized society that need can be met only in fraudulent ways. In our own case, we have the fraudulent community of mass culture, or of white superiority, or of any number of exclusive cults and

authoritarian movements which offer people the security of collective memberships.²⁸

The park activity across the street confirms that the community has changed in racial and ethnic character, but the older members, all Anglo, don't see themselves connecting with the Hispanic or African American youths playing basketball across the street at the park. They are surprised when they hear that the community now has three hundred gay or lesbian households within walking distance of the church. And their recent vision statement reflects the desire to educate those who would come to the church. But "communities are truly communities when they are open to others, when they remain vulnerable and humble; when the members are growing in love, in compassion and humility. Communities cease to be such when members close in upon themselves with the certitude that they alone have wisdom and truth and expect everyone to be like them and learn from them."²⁹

The Vision Statement's emphasis is upon the individual within the community of faith, but there seems to be less emphasis upon community or upon how the church will connect with the neighborhood or larger community. Neither Vision Statement nor Mission Statement mentions anything about Jesus Christ.

In *Moral Man & Immoral Society: a Study in Ethics and Politics*, Reinhold Niebuhr is dubious about the social successes of the church. He writes, "There are constitutional limitations in the genius of religion which will always make it more fruitful in purifying individual life, and adding wholesomeness to the more intimate social relations, such as the family, than in the problems of the more complex and political

²⁸ Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 82.

²⁹ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 19.

relations of modern society.”³⁰ The Parkview Mission Statement is more hopeful about outreach ministries, but the emphasis is upon educating people on the outside, bringing them in with the assumption that they will adopt the ways of Parkview UMC.

Rather, Parker Palmer would have the church develop a longing for a public life outside itself.

But a vision of ‘the public’ is not enough, and exhortation will not bring that vision into being. We need a living process to experience ourselves as public, a process suggested by the phrase ‘a public life.’ In such a life, strangers come in daily contact, grow accustomed to each other, learn to solve the problems which the common life poses, enrich and expand each other’s lives. My interest, then, is not simply in the static concept of the public but in the dynamic process known as public life. It is a process which brings us out of ourselves into an awareness of our connectedness, an awareness which is especially pronounced at moments of high public drama.³¹

Palmer’s dream assumes an untapped giftedness outside our doors which is available simply by developing an outside public presence.

The question that begs to be asked is whether the congregation still has the social skills to welcome the stranger, to affirm anyone who would come through the doors of the church. The people have accepted each others’ idiosyncrasies, and seem to enjoy simply being together and worshipping together without a great deal of concern about anything but keeping it the same. Palmer calls it “the new narcissism.” “The private *has* grown out of proportion in our society, and the inward journey *has* been perverted into narcissism, partly *because* we have failed to identify their public counterweight.”³² But

³⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man & Immoral Society: a Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1932), 63.

³¹ Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 20.

³² *Ibid.*, 31.

Palmer says the public and private are interdependent. "When their balance is off, when the dynamic tension between them fails, both will suffer. In our time, public life has withered and private life has become anxious and obsessive."³³

This implies that narcissistic privatism may actually exist to seek comfort from the withered public life. Conversations about the "good ol' days" are more prevalent when people have turned inward. An ethic of inquiry is not present. Public life has progressed so fast that an elderly congregation can scarcely keep up. While church members are struggling to use the cell phones and computers their children have given them as gifts, there is a rotary dial phone on the membership desk of the church office. And with the huge learning curve required to keep up with a digital society, the rotary dial generation can scarcely be blamed for their fears and frustrations, for turning inward for comfort and shared memories of simpler and more glorious times.

Engaging in public life involves overcoming these fears. In exploring the nature of human beings, Reinhold Niebuhr writes, "Man is the only creature which is fully self-conscious. His reason endows him with a capacity for self-transcendence. He sees himself in relation to his environment and in relation to other life. Reason enables him, within limits, to direct his energy so that it will flow in harmony, and not in conflict, with other life."³⁴ This implies a kind of loneliness or need for community, that there is something or someone outside oneself that meets a need the self alone cannot provide. William Sloane Coffin posits, "public good doesn't automatically follow from private virtue. A person's moral character, sterling though it may be, is insufficient to serve the

³³Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 31.

³⁴ Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 25-26.

cause of justice, which is to challenge the status quo, to try to make what's legal more moral, to speak truth to power, and to take personal or concerted action against evil, whether in personal or systemic form."³⁵

Parker Palmer insists "the church *must* incarnate its vision in public, for there and only there is the stranger to be found . . . The unity sought by the church is not achieved through calculation and manipulation, but received through contemplation and vulnerability and self-giving."³⁶ If the church refocused on reconnecting with the community, not to educate everyone, but to discover and to create space for conversation about some of the life concerns of the local residents, whatever those might be, might a miracle of at-one-ment create something greater than itself? Instead of its current isolation, might the church begin to see its own place in the community not just to keep running its traditions or its religious education programs, but to actually amplify the community that exists outside its doors with the offer of friendship and hope?

The root of creating space for others is to have a genuine interest in them. Parker Palmer says "the only limitation on self-interest is other-interest, the sense that we are members of one another for better and for worse. Other-interest comes, in part, as the result of a healthy public life. If self-interest is the dominant mood of our time, it is not because self-interest is the whole of human nature. Instead, it is partly because we lack a public life in which other-interest can be evoked and nurtured."³⁷ Therefore, if Parkview can develop a steady diet of public involvement, one would hope that an appreciation for

³⁵ William Sloane Coffin, *The Heart is a Little to the Left* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 18.

³⁶ Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 23, 24.

³⁷ Ibid., 37.

the gifts and shared interests and compelling stories of others would lead to a momentum of increased public life for the church. By offering the church as a host site for "rallies, forums, hearings and debates (including those conducted by means of public media) the church creates settings in which the public interacts and becomes aware of itself. Here, strangers have an opportunity to listen and be heard, to air their differences and conflicts, to influence each other's thinking, and to move toward mutual accommodation."³⁸ In such a forum the church could learn the needs of the parents or children in nearby schools, the rhythm of the community center across the street, the needs of local youths who are attracted to gang life.

With five active gangs on the Hilltop, crime, graffiti and gunfire are rampant in the community. "The best deterrent to crime against private property and persons is not a home arsenal, or even a skilled and well-financed police force, but the presence of a public which is aware of and cares about itself."³⁹ Right now one of the tools the community has to be aware of itself is the local Blockwatch network that often sets up block parties to create community. "*Community* is a commitment to interdependence, mutuality, responsibility to one another, and engagement in seeking the common good. It means willingness to balance the rights and responsibilities of competing groups within loyalty to a larger public good. It means affirmation of diversity, social inclusiveness, participation in the democratic decision process and creative tension between individual aspirations and social priorities. It means accountability within the larger society."⁴⁰ As

³⁸ Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 39.

³⁹ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁰ Nile Harper, *Urban Churches, Vital Signs: Beyond Charity Toward Justice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 304.

a church rich in members with time on their hands, might Parkview members find opportunities to tutor, to mentor, to offer youth the gifts of their presence and experience?

Robert Quinn dreams of *productive communities* where its members share a common purpose and each works for the benefit of all. He says, "Jesus, Gandhi, and King were all dedicated to getting difficult things done in the real world. To do this they envisioned productive community."⁴¹

When people become members of a productive community they tend to become more inner directed and other focused. They tend to be motivated by a calling that they feel deep within. They make contributions that exceed nary self-interest. People in productive communities also have another unusual characteristic. They want to be connected to reality. They want to know what is real, even if the news is bad.⁴²

Through a well orchestrated plan of strategic engagement for discovery could the church come out of its tomb of fear and grief and find resurrection in a new direction of loving interaction with the community, even leadership, so that the hard questions of crime or housing or immigration were asked within the church and so that solutions were heard within the church's hearing? An ethic of inquiry may be within Parkview's grasp as it ~~exegeses~~ its community and reflects theologically on their experiences, shared or other. Standing with the community, Parkview could create a vision and a reality of caring relationships through the generative development of community. It can evoke a process

⁴¹Robert Quinn, *Change the World: How Ordinary People Can Accomplish Extraordinary Results* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 29.

⁴²Ibid., 28.

of informed, self-aware enthusiasm for ministry that both adapts to context and remains prophetic with a radical message of love.⁴³

When community leaders ask, "What shall we do?" the church can respond with an informed opinion based on new relationships and informed inquiry. "A healthy public life not only protects people from power, but empowers them to guide government and hold it accountable. Just as the isolated individual is impotent to resist the imposition of central power, so the isolated individual is impotent to direct that power in its course."⁴⁴ Chapter Five will show the remarkable power of community welcoming and speaking truth to politicians about important issues.

There will be those who will say, "Why would the church want to get involved with the community in political issues? As discussed earlier, Jesus' ministry described in the gospels was not spent leading Torah studies, ladies' luncheons and religious activities. Jesus spoke truth to temple leaders working for Rome, healed the sick and exorcised inauthentic spirits. Jesus spent his time among the people and was focused on temple injustices against them to the extent that he was crucified for creating such uproar.

If the people of Parkview Church, who presently see themselves as powerful only over the structure of the building they cherish and struggle to maintain, became a prophetic voice in the public square where its older members brought their rich years and life wisdom to the city leaders in response to what they heard in engaging the community, might the church create for itself a more relevant reputation? If by speaking the truth in love to the "powers that be"—the city and state officials that are in nearby downtown

⁴³Withrow, "Ethic of Inquiry," 90.

⁴⁴Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 83.

Columbus—might the church use its institutional strength, especially in the Westside Cluster of churches, to promote justice in response to the listening they had done?

In *The Powers That Be*, Walter Wink emphasizes the power of those who bring their concerns to the government. He says, "By refusing to be awed by their power, the powerless are emboldened to seize the initiative, even where structural change is not immediately possible. This message, far from counseling an unattainable otherworldly perfection, is a practical, strategic measure for empowering the oppressed. It is being lived out all over the world today by previously powerless people ready to take their history into their own hands."⁴⁵ In fact, the Community Outreach Team was never awed by the power of the many politicians who came, but rather by the number of neighbors who came.

This is not a traditional ministry for the church. Ladies' luncheons, circles, golf outings, food pantries, and Bible studies have long been the staple of the church. If not those things, what is the ministry of the people of God?

The people of God are called to a possibility other than the kingdoms of the world. They must be ambassadors—again, St. Paul's word—in every part of life. They witness to another way that governments can relate to one another, that money can be earned and spent, that doctors and care-givers and engineers and lawyers and teachers can serve their constituencies, that wordsmiths and musicians and artists and philosophers can give us new visions of the human condition. That is the ministry of the laity.⁴⁶

Being ambassadors requires much more than wishful thinking. "Wishful thinking is passive and external—"wishing on a star" for a miracle or magic. Hope, by contrast, is

⁴⁵ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 105.

⁴⁶ Dozier, *Dream of God*, 150.

active and realistic. Hope demands that you envision your success, and then work toward it. Those who hope put their personalities behind their desires and thus have a more realistic opportunity to achieve them."⁴⁷ The key is to help Parkview members, most of who live outside Westgate, see their connection to the community.

In discovering the needs of the community, and in speaking truth to the powers that be, the church begins to see itself as a new and empowered organism. Resurrection texts take on new meaning as the church visions itself unwrapping the grave clothes of the local businesses who have also suffered from the exodus of so many families from the community, opening the tomb of condemnation against gay and lesbian households and declaring it empty, seeing that Jesus does indeed live within the hearts of those humble enough to listen and learn, and discovering the Holy Spirit's Pentecost of humanity in the neighborhood, not just on the altar where an eternal candle burns. "The shift in power relations gradually occurs as church members persevere in the tasks of mutually constructing a common experience, patching up inevitable breaks in communication, renewing shattered commitments, and re-examining familiar interpretations of ancient texts, which have sustained patterns of patriarchy and oppression in church life."⁴⁸

It is tragic that earth dwellers become so bombarded with images, sounds and the speed of travel that we become numb to the oppression that exists within our community. In a white Anglo-Saxon congregation, the church itself can become the oppressor. "The intensification of ethnic, racial, and cultural conflict in the former Soviet Union and many of the nations of Africa, as well as struggles over 'political correctness'

⁴⁷ James O. Prochaska, John C. Norcross, and Carlo C. Diclemente, *Changing For Good* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 113.

⁴⁸ Charles R. Foster and Theodore Brelsford, *We are the Church Together: Cultural Diversity in Congregational Life* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 19.

and 'white backlash' in the United States and Canada, only underscored for us the inadequacies of social and political strategies designed to control or assimilate those who differ from a dominant cultural group."⁴⁹ The church could lead the world into a new understanding of being a citizen of this planet simply by setting an example of revolutionary hospitality in the tradition of the Lord they claim to follow.

When the church moves from "ecclesial homogeneity to ecclesial heterogeneity,"⁵⁰ the church sees the oppression of groups in the neighborhood who have suffered from being outcast: undocumented and documented Hispanic or Somali immigrants, gay and lesbian isolation, persons without adequate healthcare, or children who need after-school help with homework or literacy. For people who lived through the Depression and World War II, it will require a new kind of courage to wade through the chaos of issues that might be raised in listening to the community. "The embrace of difference, consequently, involves the dynamics of living expectantly into the possibilities of encountering the grace of God at the points where the encounters of difference seem fraught with ambiguity."⁵¹ By reconnecting with the neighborhood and the inevitable chaos that such community meetings could bring, the church would not be seeking to fix every problem but rather to *embrace and live faithfully* in the ambiguity and change that would bring them new life as a church.⁵²

Because many in the neighborhood will not have been previously "churched," may belong to another faith altogether, or may not believe in God at all, engaging the

⁴⁹ Foster and Brelsford, *Church Together*, 29.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 113.

⁵¹ Ibid., 123.

⁵² Ibid., 156.

neighborhood would be to engage "a concept of pluralism and dynamism."⁵³ "Most Americans call themselves 'Christian' but what about the one-sixth of the population who do not? The largest segment, interestingly, is not an alternative faith group but the atheist/agnostic contingent. About ten percent of all Americans say they have no religious faith or are simply indifferent to the faith dimension."⁵⁴ By hosting meetings for the community, the church may end its isolation and see possibilities in what it means to "support and educate in order to develop a rich Spiritual Life" (quoted from the Parkview Mission Statement). By opening its doors and its sacred space to the community, the church would create new space for spirituality, even in public meetings. "Jesus removed his disciples from the isolation of village and family life and forced them into relationships with foreigners, strangers, children, women, lepers. The 'kingdoms of the world' enclosed strangers within hostile fences, eroded trust levels, and limited cordiality to kith and kin. The 'kingdom of God,' in marked contrast, involved daily table sharing and hospitality with strangers, including sympathy for aliens and criminals and safe havens for the poor."⁵⁵ Should the church of Jesus Christ do any less?

"Community is the place where our limitations, our fears and our egoism are revealed to us. We discover our poverty and our weaknesses . . . "⁵⁶ "Community is that place where the person you least want to live with always lives!"⁵⁷ By rediscovering the

⁵³ Foster and Brelsford, *Church Together*, 169.

⁵⁴ George Barna, *Boiling Point: It Only Takes One Degree* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), 211.

⁵⁵ Leonard Sweet, *Out of the Question, Into the Mystery* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2004), 134.

⁵⁶ Vanier, *Community*, 26.

⁵⁷ Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 124.

neighborhood and the human souls within it, by reaching out in love to offer the church building as a Eucharistic presence instead of an isolated beauty in the setting of a park, the church may discover an identity that is even greater than the glory days it remembers before desegregation.

A community is only truly a body when the majority of its members is making the transition from 'the community for myself' to 'myself for the community,' when each person's heart is opening to all the others, without any exception. This is the movement from egoism to love, from death to resurrection; it is the Easter, a passage, the Passover of the Lord. It is also the passing from the land of slavery to the promised land, the land of inner freedom."⁵⁸ In reconnecting to the community, the church may learn the significance of actually creating community and of *being* community.

In his work *Democracy in America* Alexis de Tocqueville observed,

When men feel a natural pity for one another's woes, and when easy and frequent relations bring them together every day and no susceptibility divides them, it is easy to see that they will help one another out when the need arises. When an American calls upon the cooperation of his fellow Americans, they seldom refuse, and I have often seen them offer their assistance spontaneously and enthusiastically.⁵⁹

Patricia will count on this enthusiasm as she invites her congregation into discovery of and engagement with the community outside the church.

⁵⁸ Vanier, *Community*, 56.

⁵⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2004), 667.

Historical Foundation

How Had Parkview Come to This Place?

The model of discovery Patricia used in her first year at Parkview includes: one-on-one interviews, small group discovery meetings with the congregation and finally, larger group discovery meetings with people from the community. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was an 18th Century small group and Christian conferencing advocate who never understood his ministry as just being within the walls of a church building. At the start of his ministry, answering “again the charge that he should settle into a collegiate or parish living and stop invading other clergymen’s parishes by his circulating among the various religious societies in Oxford and London” he wrote a close friend, I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear the glad tidings of salvation (Letters, 25:616).⁶⁰

For “Sunday Christians,” “the world as my parish” shifts the focus from the church building and those who worship there to God’s people outside the walls of the church. In fact, Wesley set up an entire system for reaching people outside the walls of the church: itinerancy. Itinerant Methodist preachers rode circuits, preaching to people in their homes and did not wait for them to travel to a church building.

⁶⁰ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 93.

Wesley had been much impressed with the Moravians' success with small groups⁶¹ and although their purpose was not necessarily focused on discovery, they formed intimate relationships⁶² for mutual sharing among their members.

Not until 1742 was the different plan introduced of organizing the entire society into essentially neighborhood groups called 'classes. The difference may be visualized by seeing the society-band structure like a slice of Swiss cheese, the holes being bands within the society, and the society-class like a round pie sliced into segments for serving. In the latter, therefore, everyone in a society was also in a class. A class ticket meant membership also in a society, and was indeed the only formal evidence.⁶³

In community meetings, a person has the comfort of knowing they are part of a larger whole, empowering that person with all the benefits and power of the larger group.

John Wesley's practice of community organizing was not limited to small group gatherings alone. Instead, he channeled the power of those gatherings to provide relief to the poor and imprisoned people he considered within his care. He was a champion of the social gospel.

The term *social gospel*, if used specifically of a historical movement, applies to only one of several facets of the broad theme of Christianity and society. Since it was the most important characteristic of Christian social relations in the early twentieth century, it can be broadened to describe the outlook of the times. This broad approach is applicable to Methodism. By the time of the Social Creed [1908], most mainline denominations had come to a new understanding of the bearing of the Christian faith on the

32. ⁶¹ Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974),

⁶² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

whole of society and not merely on the personal lives of its members.⁶⁴

The social gospel is marked by a “Jesus and we” rather than just a “Jesus and me” understanding, and can be compared to the structure of the cross itself. The vertical up-and-down member of the cross symbolizes our relationship to God. The horizontal member symbolizes our relationship to others. The faith is incomplete unless both members are included.

It is said that Methodists were slow to recognize and adopt the Social Creed, but “after they once got started, Methodists would take second place to no one in social witness.”⁶⁵ They favored “‘equal rights and complete justice for all men [women?] in all stations of life’; for industrial arbitration, factory safety, abolition of child labor and protection of women workers, reduction of hours of labor and guarantee of a living wage, an ‘equitable division of the products of industry,’ and finally, ‘for the recognition of the Golden Rule and the mind of Christ as the supreme law of society and the sure remedy for all social ills.’”⁶⁶

“General conferences of the new century [20th] regularly gave much attention to social problems” such as “the challenges of industrialization and large corporate structure, the need for increasing public responsibility for control, and the regulation of the economic system in the interests of justice for all.” “Along with these economic issues many others pressed for response—political action, militarism, temperance, race

⁶⁴ Norwood, *American Methodism*, 391.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 391, 392.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 392.

relations, population, and the status of women.”⁶⁶ This history of meeting to discuss and take a stand, conferencing, runs deep in the Methodist story, and informs the process of discovery in neighborhood groups invited to the church for conferencing. Being the church is not entirely about doing “religious activities.” Being the church is interpreting that which affects God’s people with an ethic of love.

The meetings with the larger community reflected much more ethnicity, and therefore more of the kingdom of God than regular Sunday worship at Parkview.

Unfortunately, Methodism has a deplorable record with race relations.

By curious coincidence, the very era which witnessed the development and acceptance of the Social Creed also saw the resurgence of race prejudice, especially in the South. A new kind of virulent racism, which had been almost unknown in the 1870s and 1880s, appeared in the wake of Reconstruction as the South sought to build some kind of society to replace that destroyed by [the Civil] war. It took the form of various Jim Crow laws which segregated the Negro as he had never been segregated before, even under slavery.⁶⁷

Numerous apologies in annual conferences will never make up for divisions within Methodism based on race and ethnicity. But “in view of Methodism’s rich, though equivocal, heritage in ethnic variety, it is a matter of some interest that recent trends indicate a revival of ethnic pride and an emphasis on the diversity rather than the melting-pot unity of American life.”

In large groups there emerges a corporate truth that can be incarnated by the speaker or by the group itself. If someone can articulate that truth, the truth can either reflect evil, in the case of the Ku Klux Klan, or expose evil, in the case of groups who gather to protest and expose injustice. Samuel DeWitt Proctor recalls the day Martin

⁶⁷ Norwood, *American Methodism*, 402-403.

Luther King, Jr. preached his visionary “I Have a Dream” speech to the crowd of people in the March on Washington—August 28, 1963—

We walked over to the Lincoln Memorial and as we approached the basin we were speechless at the sight of a virtual sea of Americans come together in one great moment of celebration and commitment. It looked like something apocalyptic. They were old, young, bearded, bald, formally dressed and barely covered, serious and somber, casual and carefree. They were white, Hispanic, black and Native American. All of us were there. And there was order and electric control from within. When Martin began to speak, he was artful in capturing the mood and the passion of that assembly, and he articulated in sonorous, rhythmic phrases exactly what they felt. For a fleeting instant, time stood still and eternity bent low over Washington, and *the word* became flesh again.⁶⁸

What Dr. Proctor is describing is that Dr. King eloquently gave voice and flesh to the truth crowding the throats of the people in the march that day. Their experience of injustice led them to that place and time to be healed by naming it and standing together in solidarity, their numbers highlighting its importance and urgency. They came to call for change. “Believing that change is possible causes one to act in harmony with such faith. As you live it out, the unseen evidence begins to appear. Because you *believe*, the very believing makes it so. This is the substance of things hoped for. And when faith is operational, strange things happen.”⁶⁹ Thanks be to God, the Civil Rights movement gave all Americans full and equal human rights. Even if it was on paper only, it brought us a step closer to the reign of God on this planet. The “potential transcendency”⁷⁰ brought us that much closer to justice—the “New Emancipation.”⁷¹ “Experiences that drag us,

⁶⁸ Proctor, *Substance*, 108.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

kicking and screaming, out of our small worlds and compel us to stand tall in another world, can stretch our minds, forge our character, and fuel our imaginations.”⁷² This is what gathering in community is all about, particularly when public injustices need exposing and stifled voices need liberating.

Because the church represents human beings who are part of American society, the church has long been a catalyst for social change. Like John the Baptist as a critic of government in Luke Chapter Three, the church has long been a critic of government and its power to either liberate or oppress. The power of community and shared resolution can be a tugboat to adjusting the course of an entire nation.

In 1932, both the Methodist Church and the Federal Council of Churches (founded in 1908 by thirty-three denominations) went on record as supporting government participation in economic planning and in providing means to safeguard the wellbeing of the poor. This was considered radical socialism, and a reaction was soon forthcoming.⁷³

However, after World War II many mainline denominations sought out the more affluent suburban areas that flourished after the War, abandoning the inner cities to the poor and to the African American populations.⁷⁴ It was in 1954 that Parkview Methodist laid a cornerstone for its building in what was considered an affluent suburban neighborhood, drawing an Anglo white congregation. Some came looking for a neighborhood church and some came looking for a Methodist Church.

In 1968, the merging of the Evangelical United Brethren church with the Methodist Church created the United Methodist Church. Suddenly there were three other

⁷² Proctor, *Substance*, 52.

⁷³ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985), 378.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 381.

United Methodist Churches within a two-mile radius. If one wanted a United Methodist Church, there were plenty to pick from on the west side of Columbus. Central Ohio Methodism was strong, Parkview United Methodist Church attendance was at an all-time high, and the future seemed bright.

In 1979, when the Columbus City Schools lost their final court battle in the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision requiring court-ordered busing, ironic to the call of the church to be inclusive, the 1979 order requiring busing of 35,000 students—⁷⁵ white students to black Columbus schools and black students to white suburban Columbus schools—creating an exodus from the Westgate suburb surrounding Parkview Church. As we have noted, white suburban families wanted their children to go to neighborhood schools, so many left Parkview Church for more suburban school districts where their children could attend a neighborhood school without a long bus trip. The church had failed to transform the community into one that sought diversity.

Should Parkview grow faint from taking community leadership, let it take courage from its social justice agency, the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR). In 2005, the United States government turned to the United Methodist Church for its leadership in organizing relief efforts in one of the largest natural disasters in U.S. history. It was August of 2005 when Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast and New Orleans, breaking flood levees and killing 1836 people. The storm is estimated to

⁷⁵“A Tale of Four Cities,” *Time Magazine*, Monday, September 17, 1979, available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,920671-1,00.html>; Internet; accessed 15 September.

have been responsible for more than \$81 billion (2005 U.S. dollars) in damage, making it the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history.⁷⁶

Criticism of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) led to an investigation by the United States Congress. Over 100,000 families were left homeless, and the vacuum of leadership in FEMA caused the United States government to award UMCOR \$66 million, the largest grant ever assigned to a faith-based organization. UMCOR was charged with coordinating relief efforts in the state of emergency caused by the hurricane. UMCOR did not try to do the job alone, but instead organized ten professional and voluntary organizations in an initiative called Katrina Aid Today (KAT).⁷⁷ When the United States government said "What should we do," the United Methodist Church responded.

It is in remembering this kind of response to human need and in reconnecting with a larger community of humanity that Parkview United Methodist Church may find its calling and a new identity.

Theological Foundation

Parkview Through God's Eyes

Seeing the brokenness and need in the world with the eyes of one's heart, there is a reminder there of one's own pain, of the struggle for life. One's own struggle is

⁷⁶ Hurricane Katrina, available from <http://www.hhs.gov/disasters/emergency/naturaldisasters/hurricanes/katrina/index.html>; Internet; accessed 29 August 2008.

⁷⁷ UMCOR Selects Katrina Aid Partners, 16 December 2005, available from http://www.umc.org/site/c.gjJTJbMUluE/b.1306107/k.4995/UMCOR_selects_Katrina_aid_partners.htm; Internet; accessed 10 August 2007.

redeemed by responding to the struggle of others. Sharing in that struggle creates its own community:

As we live truly from the heart, we live from where the Spirit is dwelling in us. We see people as God sees them; we see their wounds and their pain; we no longer see them as problems. We see God in them. But as we begin to live in this way, unprotected by barriers, we become very vulnerable and terribly poor. "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom." It is this poverty which becomes our wealth, for now we no longer live for our own glory but for love and for the power of God manifested in weakness.⁷⁸

How much richer might the Parkview congregation be in discovering its own spiritual poverty being filled with the wealth of communing with the weakest voices in the community?

Paul Hertig would have all urban churches involved in the city's life. "How we carry out our mission is as important as our theology of mission. Van Engen observes that too few urban churches 'have any missional intention to be God's agents for transforming the city itself.' However, mission theology is a contradiction in terms if it is not an applied theology. It always occurs in a particular time and place. Mission theology involves active participation in community settings, on sidewalks and down alley ways. This applied theology allows our narrow and preconceived understandings to shift so that we may view our contexts anew, bringing new questions and inquiries to scripture."⁷⁹

The church in America may suffer not only from the problem of having disconnected from the community, but also from a kind of pride that insists that it has something to "teach" the community. Not that this attitude is born by all, but many

⁷⁸ Vanier, *Community*, 29.

⁷⁹ Paul Hertig, *Matthew's Narrative Use of Galilee in the Multicultural and Missiological Journeys of Jesus* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 1998), 26.

Christians belong to Sunday School classes that are dreaming of receiving members to come and be like them. The inherent message is that outsiders are somehow out of tune with God. “True Christian hospitality is not a recruitment strategy designed to manipulate strangers into church membership. Rather, it is a central practice of the Christian faith—something Christians are called to do for the sake of that thing itself. . . Christians welcome strangers as we ourselves have been welcomed into God through the love of Jesus Christ.”⁸⁰

The first sin of a community is to turn its eyes from the One who called it to life, to look at itself instead. The second sin is to find itself beautiful and to believe itself to be a source of life. If it does this, it turns away from God and begins to compromise with society and the world; it becomes renowned. The third sin is that of despair. The community discovers that it is not a source of life, that it is poor, that it lacks vitality and creativity. And so it withdraws into its sadness, into the darkness of its poverty and death. But God, like the father of the prodigal son, does not cease to wait. Communities which have set aside the inspiration of God to rely on their own power should know how to return humbly to ask his forgiveness.⁸¹

Perhaps it is that we have put our trust in institutions—government, pop psychology, instant electronic communication, even Hollywood—going to a movie to escape the reality of one’s own circumstances. Even the church, its systems and practices, Robert’s Rules and disciplines, committees and conferences can disguise our separateness, even our alienation.

Jewish theologian Martin Buber is credited with reviving mystical Hasidism. Buber says we are too much “it” to each other instead of “I and Thou.” Stumbling

⁸⁰ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), 81, 82.

⁸¹ Vanier, *Community*, 159.

through life without becoming too involved with each other, people do not prioritize seeking to understand the human souls around us. Clearly, we cannot get involved with everyone, and even Buber says we cannot live without “its” in our lives. “But whoever lives only with that [“its” in their lives] is not human.”⁸² The goal is to value and create community that recognizes the “its” who have been marginalized. The church should have learned that from another Orthodox Jew—Jesus.

True community does not come into being because people have feelings for each other (though that is required, too), but rather on two accounts: all of them have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to a single living center, and they have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to one another. The second even has its source in the first but is not immediately given with it. A living reciprocal relationship includes feelings but is not derived from them. A community is built upon a living, reciprocal relationship, but the builder is the living, active center.⁸³

Reaching out to the community implies our own spiritual and emotional poverty that affirms our need for others who are different from us or have a different faith tradition from our own.

... It is not the case that the only way we can go on being neighbors who learn from each other is if I accept that story or he accepts the Gospel story. It is certainly not the case that we have to decide not to talk about those conflicting stories. But we can talk to each other about what the consequences are when communities try to shape themselves in accord with those differing stories, and the other stories of our frequently conflicting traditions. And we will look for intersections and we will look for ways in which each of us can learn from those things which one of us cannot give up, because that part of the story is unsurpassable, and the other cannot accept, because that would mean giving up something central to a way of life that had been precious for a long time. And something like that extended and open-ended conversation will have to take

⁸² Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner's, 1970), 85.

⁸³ Ibid., 94.

place with each of those other strange and sometimes prickly neighbors.⁸⁴

There is no doubt that the community around Parkview (Westgate) and especially the larger community of the Hilltop will have different stories and issues and customs from the people at Parkview. They may not know how to “play church,” removing a ball cap before coming into the church, or smoking outside the building. They may come dressed differently, or they might not even practice a religion at all.

One of the problems in the church is that we assume that those who are “unchurched” are diminished. “As Christians, we know ourselves in relationship with the Other, and also in relationship with the ‘others’—those not of the household of faith. We discover the Other and ourselves through our relationships with the others. I move toward God by moving toward others. Jesus never separated soteriology from neighborology—the artistry of how to be a neighbor to another.”⁸⁵

This is the art of Eucharistic presence. As a loaf of bread must be broken in order to be eaten, it is in this Eucharistic understanding that we recognize ourselves as broken so that we can be used. “Some people, who cannot see what nourishment they could be bringing, do not realize that they can become bread for others. They have no confidence that their word, their smile, their being or their prayer could nourish others and help them rediscover trust. Jesus calls us to give our lives for those we love. If we eat the bread

⁸⁴ Wayne A. Meeks, *Christ is the Question* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 138-139.

⁸⁵ Sweet, *Out of Question*, 125-126.

transformed into the Body of Christ, it is so that we become bread for others."⁸⁶ With such an understanding, it is exciting to dream of the power each of the one hundred sixty persons in membership at Parkview Church has in feeding the world just by being a Eucharistic presence.

Because there are so many ethnic groups in Parkview's neighborhood, including undocumented immigrants, there is a perception that "there are those who belong here and those who don't belong here." "If they don't want to learn English, they ought to go back to where they came from."

"When we insist on integrating 'otherness' into our own preconceptions and preexistent categories, we 'deface' the other, demean his or her integrity, and diminish that person's contribution to our understanding of the world. We are not called to fit someone else into our own story, but to encounter and experience the ways that God is in the other person's story. Only in a listening relationship can the other be truly 'faced' and not 'defaced.' The critical test of any faith thus becomes 'does it make space for otherness?'"⁸⁷ Personal and corporate hospitality makes space for otherness. Diana Butler Bass says "hospitality is the way we come out of ourselves."⁸⁸ "Hospitality can be frightening at times."⁸⁹ But the doing of it is important enough to be that to which we are called. Luke 9:11 says Jesus welcomed the crowds "and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured." What could be more

⁸⁶ Vanier, *Community*, 195.

⁸⁷ Sweet, *Out of Question*, 124.

⁸⁸ Bass, *Christianity for Rest of Us*, 84.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

welcoming than a calm and healing presence? When this happens, the church becomes a “God spa.”

Amplifying Leviticus 19:18, Jesus links the reward of eternal life to loving God, to loving oneself, to loving one’s neighbor. A lawyer, an expert in the law, presses Jesus for an interpretation of just who one’s neighbor might be. Jesus illuminated the question of “neighborology,” of our relationship to one another, in his teachings. In Luke 10:25-37, Jesus addresses the issue, “Who is my neighbor?”

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ²⁶He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ ²⁷He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ ²⁸And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ ³⁰Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ ³⁷He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

On a night when a tough rival game was before them, it is said that legendary Duke Basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski entered a darkened locker room carrying a single lit candle saying, “I’m looking for one person with a heart.” In this parable, is not

Jesus looking for someone with a heart? Is not “neighborology” about living out the actions and presence of a loving heart?

Though this parable begins with robbers mugging a man, the focus of the parable, and its traditional name, is on the one with the heart, the Good Samaritan who helped him:

Jesus used the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) to point out that the robbed was helped by the wounded. The Samaritan used his experience of woundedness to extend his care for the robbed. The priest and the Levite simply passed on by, perhaps because of a lack of wounded experiences. But the Samaritan stopped to assist the injured traveler because of his experience of han. While helping him, the Samaritan must have experienced the healing of his own han vicariously.⁹⁰

Let us suppose the Hilltop is the robbed and beaten one, robbed of its good name as a wonderful place to live, to raise a family, to shop, to attend church, and to get a good foundational education. Its properties have been vandalized, tagged by gangs, and have been left to further harm by local law enforcement who do not see their function as improving the quality of life on the Hilltop. They are more likely to see their task as reactive, reacting to crime, rather than as proactive or preventive. Perhaps they are saying, “Let the Blockwatch people worry about prevention.”

One Hilltop policeman was recently taking a report of a drive-by shooting on the same street as two Parkview Context Associates had experienced the prior year. The officer told the shocked and shaken but unharmed victim, a Blockwatch member, “What do you expect when you live in an urban area like this?” This pastor received this information via receiving a copy of the Blockwatch’s grievance to the Columbus mayor.

⁹⁰ Park, *Hurt to Healing*, 132.

The priests and Levites, “avoiders in this parable,” may have said the same thing to themselves as they saw the man beaten and robbed by the side of the road. Maybe they were saying to themselves, “That’s what you have to expect nowadays on this road. If you’re going to travel it, be prepared to encounter some trouble. Better him than me.” A mugging of avoidance.

But moved with pity, a man who is a socio-religious outcast, a Samaritan, gets involved. He, too, has been mugged by the religious elite of Jerusalem. He no doubt worshipped at an unsanctioned temple in Samaria, so no self-respecting Jew was allowed to speak to him. The “official temple” was in Jerusalem. He, too, had been avoided. From that well of brokenness and anger, the Samaritan became a Eucharistic presence by applying healing oil and wine to the victim’s wounds, presenting him to someone (the innkeeper) who, trained in caring for wayfarers, could tend to his long-term needs.

The churches on the Hilltop have been reactive as well simply because the need is so urgent. Responding with compassion several churches, including Parkview, have opened food pantries, and United Methodist Cluster churches opened a Freestore.

Nowhere in these scenarios do we hear anyone shouting, “Enough!” Like the Good Samaritan, the church as a Eucharistic presence can get involved in the life of the Hilltop, triaging the wounds, pouring the oil of listening on peoples’ dreams of the Hilltop’s rebirth, applying the wine of compassion to its issues and speaking truth to power. But someone still needs to get to the root of the systemic issues that have mugged the Hilltop. Someone must shout “Enough!”

The church has confused its “neighbor” to be folks within the church, perhaps extending the name to the survivors over in a “neighboring” church. The people of the

Hilltop are the neighbors Jesus would have us embrace—the poor, the victims of poverty, the unemployed, and the children who don't know who Jesus is. Even closer to the church in Westgate neighbors are robbed at the rate of three per day in Precinct 19. Someone must shout "Enough!"

The Good Samaritan got involved. The issue of mixing church and state is that no church is equipped to solve all the political problems. As the Good Samaritan handed the beaten and robbed man to an experienced innkeeper for long term care, so Parkview can name the issues on the Hilltop and hand those issues to politicians and leaders who are trained in intervention. Should the politicians fail, the church must be ready to hold them accountable.

In order to triage the issues, the church, as a Eucharistic presence, must invite a more complete community, including representatives from the undocumented immigrant community, in order to better understand the world around them. In the church, this more complete community becomes the intimacy of the reign of God. "The most intimate union with God is the actual presence of God. Although this relationship with God is totally spiritual, it is quite dynamic, because the soul is not asleep; rather, it is powerfully excited. In this state, the soul is livelier than fire and brighter than the unclouded sun, yet, at the same time, it is tender and devout."⁹¹ In community with all its neighbors the church becomes a bonfire of faith.

It is exciting to learn to be fully present, open to God and to the community. It is also stressful as God's people lay down preconceptions and disarm themselves of solutions and savior complexes. "But if we can approach each other through the God who

⁹¹ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1982), 65.

is found at the deep center of our true selves, then we can come together not in distortion but in truth, not in self-interest but in compassion. When we allow God's love to mediate our relations, we place between us holy space, a space in which we can respect and be respected for who we are."⁹² In a physical sense, once a human being is born, that person is self-differentiated from every being on the earth. In a spiritual sense, one is joined to every human being ever born. This is the essence of *shalom*—healing and wholeness. "In short, *shalom* is closely related to salvation, the healing of the disordered and broken into the harmony of its created wholeness."⁹³ The church can incarnate Eucharist in the community by re-presenting this harmony. Writing about the neighborhood church (such as Parkview), Diana Butler Bass says, "In the biblical tradition, harmony manifests salvation, from the root word *salvus*, meaning "to heal."⁹⁴ Bass describes God's dream of community and creational healing:

To heal, to pray for healing, to work for healing, is to enact God's dream of *shalom*, to participate in God's longing to restore created harmony to the universe. Indeed, one of the Christian titles for Jesus, "Savior," comes from the Greek *soter*, which means both savior and healer. Contrary to what I learned in childhood, Jesus did not just heal a few people in a few odd stories about miracles. Rather Jesus embodied healing, healing for all creation, healing that would bring forth God's *shalom*.⁹⁵

To be Eucharist is to be a living being that incarnates God and recognizes God in others we meet. "In incarnation, God becomes 'other'—no longer God in heaven but God

⁹² Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 109.

⁹³ Bass, *Christianity for Rest of Us*, 110.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

in mortal flesh."⁹⁶ Quoting from Romans 1:13, Leonard Sweet notes: "Two Greek words for hospitality are primarily used in the New Testament. One is *proslambanomai*, which means to 'take aside' and 'take with'—in other words, to select and bring along. The other is *philoxenia*, which means more than simply welcoming the stranger, but loving the stranger."⁹⁷

As Christians meet people from other ethnicities, we must choose to "take with" all that we are as we expect others to "take with" all that they are. Then our love for the stranger completely embraces, comes alongside and liberates all that they are. It is as if we become a "starter" to a loaf of bread to which we must add other ingredients like flour and water in order to be complete. The church becomes a "starter" who is added to by the giftedness of true community. Then, by the power of recognizing that even the community we create is just a "starter", we recognize the God who calls us and feeds us.

When I first came to know you, you raised me up to make me see that what I saw is Being, and that I who saw am not yet Being. And you gave a shock to the weakness of my sight by the strong radiance of your rays, and I trembled with love and awe. And I found myself far from you 'in the region of dissimilarity, and heard as it were your voice from on high: 'I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me."⁹⁸

The challenge of breaking out of isolation is that a different reality longs to be created, for the soul is made for fellowship with God and with the world. Reengaging

⁹⁶ Sweet, *Out of Question*, 127.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ St. Augustine, *Confessions* (Oxford: University Press, 1991), 123-124.

with the community is an existential issue because God has a dream that all God's people might be fully perfected in community.

Wolfhart Pannenberg, a systematic theologian writes, "Our disposition for the destiny of fellowship with God is not left to us to develop on our own. On the way to our destiny and in relation to it, we are not just subjects. We are the theme of a history in which we become what we already are. At present the goal is indistinct. It is not even present to us as a goal but only in an indefinite trust that opens up the horizon of world experience and intersubjectivity, and also in a restless thrust toward overcoming the finite."⁹⁹ In other words, there are ever new boundaries where Christ calls from the other side. What may seem finite to a congregation—ecumenism (relating to other churches), connectionalism (relating to other churches of the same denomination), or even community meetings—is actually infinite in possibilities, in the stories waiting to be heard or told, and in the people waiting to be loved.

The power of imagination is key to a congregation's dreaming of a future in community:

Once the emphasis on inquiry gains momentum, the church broadens its perspective about the future by adding another element: imagination. Congregations think not only about current context, but the long view, the possible scenarios for the church's role in the next ten to twenty years. The framework for scenario-building coupled with the mission and context provides concrete possibilities for the future toward which a congregation can work. This imaginative exercise also provides a state of readiness or anticipation that moves the church from a fad orientation to a public leadership role in the unfolding social, economic and political world. The church has potential to co-create the future with God and with community based on imaginative and informed scenario-building with the public arena in mind.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 228.

¹⁰⁰ Withrow, "Ethic of Inquiry," 89.

This image of community seems almost utopian, and surely it is recognized that the Parkview Church will need much help along its journey of reconnecting with the community. But as Jesus wept over Jerusalem, so Parkview should remember its heart of compassion as gunfire, emergency vehicle sirens, and the voices of children mingle in the giftedness and brokenness of the surrounding community. To hear and do nothing would be unthinkable indifference. But to hear and invite, even to act, would be to embrace a “transformative compassion for the world—that which Christian tradition calls wisdom. The New Testament refers to such a transformation as *metanoia*, meaning a radical change of mind and heart that redirects our whole being . . .”¹⁰¹

Engaging in public life expects that diverse opinions will bring inevitable conflict. “Any theology of public life must confront public conflict and the pain it produces. And such a theology must point to the promise of Christian faith: that when we respond to conflict with compassion, even on the cross, we will be resurrected and given new life.”¹⁰² Dr. Martin Luther King wrote, “We need shapers of a new, non-violent society which will make us a new people with a new kind of power . . . I doubt if the problems of our teeming ghettos will have a great chance to be solved until the white majority, through genuine empathy, comes to feel the ache and anguish of the Negroes’ daily life.”¹⁰³ But Walter Brueggemann encourages us to “cut through the numbness, to penetrate the self-deception, so that the God of endings is confessed as Lord.”¹⁰⁴ “The

¹⁰¹ Bass, *Christianity for Rest of Us*, 97.

¹⁰² Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 106-107.

¹⁰³ Martin Luther King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 100-101.

¹⁰⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 49.

task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."¹⁰⁵ In the light of this doubt, may every citizen who came to Parkview's community meetings be moved to become an agent of change in the world in which they move. "The church will practice the public life by practicing the living presence of God, a presence in which gaps are bridged, wounds healed, obstacles surmounted, the many made one."¹⁰⁶

If one were to name the journey toward the public life it might be called *shalom*, a place of peace, for it will be similar to the journey that Brueggemann describes as "'the central vision' of the Bible in which 'all of creation is one, every creature in community with every other, living in harmony and security toward the joy and well-being of every other creature.' In short, *shalom* is closely related to salvation, the healing of the disordered and broken into the harmony of its created wholeness. As another writer says, 'the kernel of *shalom* is communal harmony.'¹⁰⁷ In *The Powers That Be*, Walter Wink says we must live as those who *expect* miracles:

It makes no sense to cling to small hopes. We are emboldened to ask God for something bigger. The same faith that looks clear-eyed at the immensity of the forces arrayed against God is the faith that affirms God's miracle-working power. Trust in miracles is, in fact, the only rational stance in a world that can respond to God's incessant lures in any number of ways. We are commissioned to pray for miracles because nothing less is sufficient. We pray to God, not because we understand these mysteries, but because we

¹⁰⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 132.

¹⁰⁷ Bass, *Christianity for Rest of Us*, 110.

have learned from our tradition and from experience that God, indeed, *is* sufficient for us, whatever the Powers may do.¹⁰⁸ We can expect miracles when we have little to lose and much to gain. Brueggemann is even more candid: "I believe that the proper idiom for the prophet in cutting through the royal numbness and denial is the language of grief, the rhetoric that engages the community in mourning for a funeral they do not want to admit. It is indeed their own funeral."¹⁰⁹ As the faithful see in the life of Oscar Romero, there is power in not having anything to lose. Parkview UMC is near the edge of the precipice of closing its doors. It can claim the power of not having anything to lose and expect powerful miracles.

Parkview's people are human beings with life problems, physical challenges and some are frail from age. But one on one, they may have more courage to welcome the community than as a group. There will be some who will come to the community meetings out of curiosity and some who will come out of hospitality. And there will be some who will stay home, either because they don't know what to do, because they are confused, or because they just don't care. Miracles or funerals? As Parkview brings the community hope for deliverance, is Parkview's deliverance not on the line? Is it too much of a miracle to expect that Parkview church may be transformed by the community it is in fear of engaging? Is this not the way of the gospel?

Next, Chapter Four discusses the methodology Pastor Cock adopted and used in interviewing people who could introduce her to the Parkview community, gathering the small congregational groups, and in engaging the community through phenomenal gatherings of community residents, politicians and members of the press.

¹⁰⁸ Wink, *Powers That Be*, 197-198.

¹⁰⁹ Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 51.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The rich field experience of congregational and community discovery related to Parkview United Methodist Church was designed as a three-pronged model: personal interviews, congregational small-group encounters, and large community listening meetings. This chapter will discuss methodologies as well as the design of the model Pastor Cook used to initiate and measure the discovery to acquaint herself with the church and its community.

Methods Chosen

The paradigm that is normative for pastors taking a new appointment is to come into the church and preach a great introductory sermon, meet as soon as possible with the church leadership and start prescribing religious/spiritual, administrative or practical fixes for what people say is wrong. Learning names and faces usually comes with time, especially as the pastor is able to encounter people outside the receiving line after worship.

Though there is nothing intrinsically wrong in any of the activities of that paradigm, the pastor can often fall into the trap of “savior complex” where it’s up to the pastor to assume the leadership role and fix things. The Parkview church has been in

decline for nearly thirty years, and membership has declined 36% since 2000.¹ It is unlikely that the new pastor can change this trend in any dramatic way, although there has been a slight 13% increase in worship attendance when comparing July 2007 with July 2008.

The paradigm the new pastor researched is based on listening and presence rather than on prescriptive “hit the ground running” action. The model Patricia used to study the congregation and its community says, “I care enough about what you think to hear what it is you have to say.” In the personal interviews, the small group gatherings and the larger community gatherings, many people said how glad they were to be asked how they think and feel.

This researcher chose qualitative rather than quantitative methodology to study the individual and group discovery process at Parkview. Qualitative research is “an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting.”² Though the results and data were impressive, a quantitative approach to studying the Parkview congregation and its community would not have been appropriate because the data is descriptive. Observable behavior such as peoples’ conversations, feelings, memories, and situational group discussions were the foci of the project and therefore not statistical in terms of data. This researcher did not wish to remain completely aloof to the data gathered. Rather, “Qualitative researchers are

¹Figure from the researcher’s District Superintendent during a one-on-one interview, August, 2008.

²John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1994), 1-2.

concerned with the meanings people attach to things in their lives. . . . Qualitative researchers empathize and identify with the people they study in order to understand how those people see things.”³ This researcher wanted to get to know them, their names, their stories, and their joys and concerns.

Also, qualitative research is inductive. Instead of collecting data to assess preconceived models, hypotheses, or theories, qualitative researchers develop concepts, insights, and understandings from patterns in the data.⁴ “Qualitative researchers are concerned primarily with process, rather than outcomes or products. Qualitative researchers are interested in meaning—how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and their structures of the world.”⁵ The adventure of listening is that people are “unwrapped” in the stories they tell and the way they express themselves.

The process is creative and intuitive as opposed to mechanical.⁶ This researcher appreciates intuitive work and has enjoyed the qualitative approach to studying her congregation because it has allowed her the opportunity to improve her listening skills within a large and elastic project.

In qualitative studies, researchers follow a flexible research design. We begin our studies with only vaguely formulated research questions. We do not know what to look for or what specific questions to ask until we have spent some time in a setting. As we learn about a setting and how participants view their experiences, we can make decisions regarding additional data to collect on the basis of what we have already learned.⁷

³ Steven J. Taylor and Robert Bogdan, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource*, 3rd Ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998), 7.

⁴Ibid., 7.

⁵Creswell, *Research Design*, 145.

⁶Taylor and Bogdan, *Qualitative Research*, 8.

⁷Ibid.

This approach is particularly helpful as surprising answers or phenomena emerge. Rather than adhering to a strict plan that may have otherwise ignored the unforeseen issues arising, the more flexible qualitative approach anticipates and embraces them as part of the human experience. While being sensitive to unstated assumptions and unarticulated meanings, “the goal of qualitative research is to make sure the theory fits the data and not vice versa.”⁸

Qualitative research also seeks to look at people holistically. “When we reduce people’s words and acts to statistical equations, we can lose sight of the human side of social life. When we study people qualitatively, we get to know them personally and experience what they experience in their daily struggles in society. We learn about concepts such as beauty, pain, faith, suffering, frustration, and love, whose essence is lost through other research approaches.”⁹ In doing research with God’s people, these are issues that can lead a pastor to opportunities for further pastoral care outside the research project.

In qualitative research the pastor doesn’t try to be unobtrusive. Instead, the researching pastor can handle the interviews as one would handle a normal conversation rather than a formal question-and-answer exchange.¹⁰ For this researching pastor, it was particularly important to be as perceptive as possible, not appearing to judge what is being said, taking notes almost reverently.

⁸Taylor and Bogdan, *Qualitative Research*, 8.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

There is a justice element to qualitative research. In qualitative research the researcher believes all perspectives are worthy of study. "The goal of qualitative research is to examine how things look from different vantage points. The student's perspective is just as important as the teacher's; the juvenile delinquent's as important as the judge's; the paranoid's as important as the psychiatrist's; the homemaker's as important as the breadwinner's; . . . [and] that of the researched as important as the researcher's."¹¹ In qualitative research, everyone is unique and deserves an equity of respect and attention.

Data Collection Procedures

"Data collection procedures in qualitative research involve four basic types: observations, interviews, documents, and visual images. . . In many qualitative studies, multiple data collection procedures are used."¹² The method used to collect data for the personal interviews was notes taken from memory directly following the interviews. These notes were transcribed into a computer for reference in Chapters Five and Six of this paper where the researcher will comment on the patterns and idiosyncrasies of the answers to the questions asked, triangulating them with the data collected in the small group gatherings and the community meetings.

Data collection for the small group gatherings was gathered into notes taken at each meeting. Because the same questions were asked at each gathering, the researcher was able to make some comparisons and observations of the answers. In designing the

¹¹ Taylor and Bogdan, *Qualitative Research*, 9.

¹² Creswell, *Research Design*, 149.

questions, Patricia asked for help from one of her Professional Associates and a mutual friend, both of whom teach listening skills.

Questions for the large group meetings were designed by the Community Outreach Team (Context Associates). Data collection for the large group meetings entailed the answers to questions by people in the large gatherings which were summarized in email form and mailed to attendees who had indicated a desire to receive information by email and therefore supplied the Context Associates with their email addresses. Patricia also kept field notes and emails from the other Context Associates.

In a qualitative study one can “Expect the research questions to evolve and change during the study, a thought also consistent with the assumption of an emerging design. Often in qualitative studies the questions are under continual review and reformulation (as in a grounded theory study).”¹³ This was true particularly in the large group meetings where the questions were reviewed and changed for the third and fourth meetings according to the data the Context Associates were seeking.

Hypothesis

Someone once remarked that for a pastor and congregation, it takes three years to say hello. Because United Methodists use an appointive itinerant system, placing its pastors no less than five miles from a prior urban appointment, it is not uncommon that the pastor has had no prior contact with the community. He or she would not be familiar with the family systems, who is related to whom, with the issues of the local community, and especially how the church relates to the community. Rather than passively and

¹³Creswell, *Research Design*, 71.

randomly allowing the congregation and its community to inundate the newly appointed pastor with a deluge of information and ideas, a series of personal interviews, congregational small group discovery/listening meetings and community meetings was the plan Pastor Cook used to be more quickly acquainted with the congregation and community.

Intervention and Research Design

The Petri dish in which Patricia began this research was that she knew very little about the community and the church to which she had been appointed. The only thing she was told at the time of her appointment is that Parkview was a church with a dwindling congregation, that a researching local pastor had identified three hundred homosexual households in the area through the census bureau, and that it is an urban congregation. News reports and her map of gunfire had alerted Patricia to the significant level of crime in the area.

In herself, Patricia created a Petri dish of curiosity about the church and the community. Experience gained at former churches would be helpful, but each context has its own stories, its own personality. It was Patricia's desire to become as quickly acquainted with the community as possible, loosely controlling the learning process by deliberately intensifying it and meeting it head on.

Not unlike a presidential candidate who meets with political, economic, military and humanitarian advisors to build relationships and to formulate policy, Patricia began the process of interviews even before her appointment began. She interviewed the former pastor and a former District Superintendent in her denomination to discuss an appropriate

“get-to-know-you-quick” modus operandi. It was the latter who suggested listening meetings with the congregation. Other interviews with people who have been long time “Hilltoppers” helped Patricia better understand the community into which she was moving. Those interviews were held just after her move to Parkview and included people in the community who have long-term memories of it or are official historian(s). Patricia kept a journal of those interviews which will be quoted in Chapter Five.

Next, Patricia met with the congregation in what became seven small group interviews held on Sunday evenings. With the exception of two group meetings held at the parsonage, one of which was held with youth loosely related to the congregation, the meetings were held at individual members’ homes in a series Patricia named “Porches and Patios.” As it turned out, only one of the meetings was held on a “porch” because of rain or because of space.

Shortly after coming to the church, Patricia called a group of Context Associates together to help set up the community meetings. The Context Associates named their group “the Community Outreach team,” received recognition from Church Council, and began their work in inviting the community to listening/discovery meetings based on the success of the work Patricia had done with grassroots community meetings on the Near East Side of Columbus.

The Community Outreach team reviewed two models for their research—Appreciative Inquiry and Asset Mapping. Though Appreciative Inquiry seemed like a positive approach to take, it did not allow for naming the pain that the group knew would inevitably be named in a community where there was so much urban decay, blight and crime. Through Asset Mapping, they understood that an attitude of scarcity was what

may be already pervading the Hilltop area. So in an attitude of abundance, they named the groups, businesses and residents they would invite to what became four community meetings, although the original intent was to have either two or three. Patricia and some of the four other Community Outreach team members took field notes, prepared meeting summaries, and met to reflect on the meetings. There were approximately three hundred emails sent amongst the team during the three months that the community meetings were held, and those will be counted as field notes for the sake of this study.

Length of Study

Patricia's first interviews began in June of 2007, one month before her appointment began on July 1, 2007, and the last community meeting was held on April 5, 2008—approximately nine months. The Community Outreach Team continued to meet and email to discuss “next steps” which will be covered in Chapter Six.

Each interview lasted approximately one-half hour. The congregational small-group meetings lasted approximately one and one-half hours, and the community meetings each lasted approximately one and one-half hours.

Nature and Number of Informants

Personal interviews were Patricia's first step in discovering Parkview Church. Patricia discussed her efforts of discovery with several people familiar with the Hilltop who made some of the recommendations for interviewees. The personal interviews included the following informants:

1. The former Parkview UMC pastor

2. A former District Superintendent
3. A municipal judge who grew up on the Hilltop
4. A Hilltop historian
5. A pastor who grew up on the Hilltop
6. The Parkview UMC lay leader
7. Patricia's former seminary professor who published an article on Appreciative Inquiry and who also became one of Patricia's Professional Associates.

The judge, the historian and the pastor were referred to Patricia by a former politician in the area. Several of the interviews took place over lunch or at Parkview. These persons represent upper-middle to middle-class backgrounds and are all Caucasian.

The group meetings were arranged at Patricia's request by Parkview's Staff Parish Relations Committee who recruited host families and their homes. Using pulpit and bulletin announcements and newsletter articles, the congregation was invited to sign up for a group meeting. It was emphasized that everyone's voice was needed in order to make the effort a success.

The group meetings consisted of between seven and twelve persons, most of whom were members of the congregation, and as previously noted, were held in the parsonage and members' homes. The congregation consists of mostly middle-class persons who, with the exception of two adopted African American children, are Caucasian.

The four community meetings were held in the lower level Fellowship Hall of Parkview Church and consisted of:

1. Fifty people in the first meeting who were business owners, politicians and professional people in the Hilltop area.

2. One hundred fifty people in the second meeting who were residents, business owners or professionals, politicians and news crews.
3. Ninety people in the third meeting who were a combination of the groups listed above.
4. Fifty people in the fourth meeting, designated as a “come-back” meeting to report on actions taken and representing persons from groups named above.

Most of the persons represented at the meeting appeared to be from upper-middle to lower-middle class and were Caucasian along with African American, Asian and Indian.

Assumptions and Allegiances

Patricia had long seen news reports of crime on the Hilltop. Though crime is prevalent in Columbus as a whole, like other large cities, there are areas where crime is intense. The 2003 map of gunfire in Franklin County (see Appendix A) showed that gunfire was most intense on the Near East Side and on the Hilltop. So Patricia came to the Hilltop assuming that crime would be an issue, and not just in the community meetings. During her first week at the parsonage, she was sitting on her side porch and heard a bullet whiz past her, fired from the park across the street. As previously noted, one of the Context Associates who lives around ten blocks from the church had been the victim of a drive-by shooting where five shots were fired at her while she was sitting on her side porch. Both were fortunate not to be injured.

During her project on the Near East Side, Patricia had tried to obtain crime statistics from the Columbus Metropolitan Library, but no local crime information is published by the Columbus Police or any other law enforcement agency in the area. Patricia's experience with law enforcement told her this was not a good sign since if the

statistics were good, they would not only be published but advertised. It was only because of the "highway shooter" in 2003 and the nationwide media attention it received that the map of gunfire had been published. During the weeks before the shooter was captured, people had avoided driving on the south outer belt, but the map of gunfire published soon after showed that shooting was rampant in many urban areas of the city. So Patricia began this process of discovery with the assumption that the people interviewed would have some concerns about crime.

So as not to be overwhelmed with too many issues, the Context Associates initially invited groups in the Westgate area, a small island in the Hilltop in which the church sets. But the first meeting revealed that people from outside Westgate had come. As the Syro-Phoenician woman nudged Jesus to offer his ministry to Gentiles as well as Jews (Mark 7:24-30), so the Context Associates immediately adjusted their hospitality to the entire Hilltop Community. For all of the Context Associates there was a high level of curiosity and anticipation of what might happen when the community came to the church for meetings.

The allegiances in the groups were based on shared community. The small group process revealed that most of the folks who attended them had known each other for as long as forty or fifty years or had grown up at Parkview. They had survived wars together, positive and negative experiences with clergy and many excellent worship, outreach and education experiences together. For a lot of people in the congregation, the church is their second home, and many members spend more time there each week than just one hour in worship. These groups were largely likeminded, and with the possible

exception of their relationship with former clergy, there was no sense of an “us vs. them” sentiment.

The larger community group meetings revealed that people who attended share a great love for the Hilltop and lament the loss of its glory days. Though the local State Representative holds Town Hall meetings it was the perception of some who attended that the Hilltop had not seen such truly opening listening meetings for twenty-five years. For this group as well, the only sense that there were divisions within the group was when a woman raised an issue of wanting to start a Westgate Neighbors Association to which only some of the people present might belong.

As noted before, the attitude of the congregation towards the congregational meetings was heard to be of great excitement. A large majority of the worshipping congregation took part in those small group meetings. With regard to the larger community meetings, there was a sense of curiosity, perhaps with even some detachment. Only about 20% of the worshipping congregation attended the community meetings while around 85% of the worshipping congregation attended the small group congregational meetings.

Instrumentation

“In qualitative analysis several simultaneous activities engage the attention of the researcher: collecting information from the field, sorting the information into categories, formatting the information into a story or picture, and actually writing the qualitative text.”¹⁴ Although there are four other Context Associates on the Community Outreach

¹⁴Creswell, *Research Design*, 153.

team, the pastor/research “is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Data are mediated through this human instrument, rather than through inventories, questionnaires, or machines.”¹⁵ The Context Associates provided enormous assistance in the analysis of the community meetings, but they were not present at the one-on-one interviews or at all of the small group congregational meetings and could not, therefore, assist in analyzing that data.

The Researcher’s Role and Relationship with Informants

In quantitative methodology, the researcher remains distant and independent from the research. In qualitative methodology, “Researchers interact with those they study . . . In short, the researcher tries to minimize the distance between him- or herself and those being researched . . . The qualitative investigator admits the value-laden nature of the study and actively reports his or her values and biases, as well as the value nature of information gathered from the field.”¹⁶ In fact, it was Patricia’s goal to engage and get acquainted with as many people as she could. In the small group gatherings, she was able to identify with much of what members said about the church because she had heard similar remarks in the four churches she had served prior to coming to Parkview. Though some of the remarks led her to draw conclusions, her main concern was to hear peoples’ hearts, their concerns and their joys.

The researcher’s ethical concerns were in keeping answers confidential within the small group meetings and to allow someone from the Context Associates group to facilitate the large group gatherings.

¹⁵ Creswell, *Research Design*, 145.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

Next, Chapter Five details the rich field experience of the project and the data that may be interpreted qualitatively.

CHAPTER FIVE

FIELD EXPERIENCE

Collection of Data

One-on-one Interviews

As part of the methodology chosen for this project, Patricia included one-on-one interviews as a way of getting to know her new church appointment and its community.

These interviews included:

1. The former Parkview UMC pastor
2. A former District Superintendent
3. A municipal judge who grew up on the Hilltop
4. A Hilltop historian
5. A pastor who grew up on the Hilltop
6. The Parkview UMC lay leader
7. Patricia's former seminary professor who published an article on Appreciative Inquiry and who also became one of Patricia's Professional Associates.

From the moment Patricia found out where she would be appointed upon leaving Bexley, she wanted to learn as much as possible about the Parkview congregation and its community, from whom Patricia suspected the church had become disconnected. From her Conference office she had obtained some of the church's financial documents whose bar graphs all pointed downward, and she remembered a question from her former

District Superintendent asking her if she would be willing to take a small and dying church. She wondered if this was it. A friend who also shared her curiosity about the church had run for the legislature in the area of the church and suggested several of the persons who were interviewed.

Before interviewing any of those persons Patricia scheduled a lunch interview with the former pastor, the first woman to have pastored the Parkview congregation. A review of Patricia's notes from the interview reveal very little that is relevant to this paper (such as shut-ins, where the financial records are kept, changing bank signatures, etc), but there is one comment that sums up the interview--that the people at Parkview are its greatest asset as well as its greatest liability.

Sharing lunch with a retired District Superintendent of her Conference who had an illustrious career, pastoring many churches, Patricia gleaned three helpful suggestions from their conversation:

1. Ask the Staff Parish Liaison Committee Chair or the Lay Leader to set up small group meetings that would begin immediately upon arrival at the church.
2. The congregation knows its financial situation and have probably been told the church is dying. There is no need to remind them.
3. Visitation at home and at work is important. People love to show off their workplace.

Lunching with a retired judge who grew up on the Hilltop at Sullivan and Binns, Patricia learned that West High was the destination of choice for peoples' children and that before desegregation, it was already an integrated school. The community was proud of the good education students received at West High and of the fact that it was already an integrated school. The judge no longer lives on the Hilltop and lamented its decline and crime as its greatest liability but said the Hilltop's greatest asset is its people.

The interview with the historian was fascinating. She proudly showed a map of the Hilltop that had been drawn to show the Civil War encampment, its prison and its cemetery and the streets named after it. She said the Hilltop's greatest asset is its traditions—the bean dinners, the former parade and its people. She said the Union soldiers used to cook and give away beans as a kind of festival on the Hilltop because it was all they had. They no longer cook beans and give them away at the “Bean Dinner.” She sees the Hilltop's greatest liability as the loss of industry in the area.

An interview with a pastor who has a special passion for urban ministry and grew up on the Hilltop revealed his concern for the gangs and the decline since desegregation. He suggested that there were a number of civic commissions on the Hilltop with whom Patricia would want to connect. He believes the Hilltop's greatest asset is its people.

The Lay Leader at Parkview spoke largely about Parkview's traditions, saying that most of its members had belonged almost from its beginning. She said they were once sixteen hundred members and now only one tenth of that number, saying the greatest liability is that its people have given up visitation and that she has been the person most active in doing that ministry. She said their greatest asset is their love for the church.

The interview with her former seminary professor who specializes in church administration and leadership confirmed Patricia's frustrations with the Appreciative Inquiry model, that it does not encourage naming the pain that people may feel in coming to the community meetings. She encouraged Patricia to find ways to begin a parallel congregation through taizé worship, hopefully attracting folks from the gay and lesbian community around the church.

The Small Group Gatherings of the Congregation

The small group congregational meetings began within Patricia's first month as pastor. There were eight small group meetings with a total of seventy people, comprised of sixty-three adults and seven youth, with an overall average of thirty years membership at Parkview and a total of one thousand five hundred eighty-five years of combined membership. Six of the informants were non-members. The questions were authored by Patricia, one of her Professional Associates and a mutual friend of theirs, both who teach listening skills.

The meetings were each held at members' homes or at the parsonage, and most were held on Sunday evenings. Each hosting household served drinks and dessert, although one family served a Sloppy Joe dinner. This was the first time people had been in some of these homes for decades, and the first time the parsonage had been open to the congregation in decades as well.

Each group participant signed in noting the number of years they had belonged to the church or had been coming to the church and their email address. Twenty-nine of the informants indicated an email address. Most of the answers between meetings were predictably similar and are detailed in Appendix C. The questions were as follows:

1. What first drew you to Parkview Church?
2. If the church closed today, what would the neighborhood miss?
3. What are the essential ministries at Parkview?
4. What must we stop doing?
5. Why do you think the church has declined in membership?

6. What new thing must we insert in the life of the church?
7. What are the needs of the neighborhood?
8. What are your dreams for the next six months?
9. What are you willing to sacrifice to make these dreams a powerful reality?

All of the questions were answered thoroughly except for the ninth question which was answered more reluctantly. They agreed that time and money would be the sacrifice.

The Community Meetings

First, Patricia preached a sermon called "Inside-Out Church" calling the church from behind its walls in order to connect with the community. The church had just experienced hundreds of children coming to witness an outdoor drama of Bible characters on the lawn on Halloween. There was a live nativity on the lawn during Advent. The church had begun to emerge into a better visibility.

After a first class presentation to Church Council to receive recognition as a Ministry of Parkview, the Community Outreach/Context Associates Team was very methodical in planning the first meeting. Seeing itself as a catalyst for action, the group planned each detail so that guests would not feel their time was wasted.

Responding to invitations hand delivered to business owners and professionals in the Westgate area by the Community Outreach Team (Context Associates), there were fifty respondents who came to "Where There's a Will, There's a Way" Community Leaders Forum at twelve o'clock noon on Friday, January 18, 2008. Most of the respondents were professional people or business owners, including a couple politicians.

A few resided in the Westgate area as well. The focus of the ninety-minute meeting was “quality of life,” with the following agenda:

Community Meeting #1, Friday, January 18, 2008

Quality of Life on the Hilltop Community Leaders Forum

Welcome

Blessing and Lunch

Self-Introductions

Table Talk

Determining the Essential Elements

Identifying Existing Assets

Action Steps

Thank You and Closing Comments

The committee anticipated that people would appreciate being invited as “community leaders,” even if they were only potential ones, and would want to come to see and be seen. People from the congregation donated homemade food, and a spouse of one of the Community Outreach team members supervised the food and the kitchen. The team posted way-finding signs outside the church building and welcomed them to Fellowship Hall with a sign-in and name tag. Intentional hospitality was a large part of the event for the team.

The team appointed one of their members, a former high school principal and football coach, a trained facilitator, to facilitate the meeting. Patricia opened the meeting with remarks about Jesus’ concerns for his community and his role as a prophetic voice in the public square. Patricia also noted that one of the church members had suffered a

drive-by shooting at her home in Wiltshire Heights, just blocks away, and from her story, a team and this meeting were born. Though the young woman was present in the leadership of the Community Outreach Team, she had declined to tell the story herself, feeling vulnerable to news media who were present. The results of the first community meeting are summarized in Appendix D with many answers to each question. It was only later that the Context Associates narrowed the answers to larger subheadings of Community Development, Crime and Safety and Education.

Community Meeting #2, Saturday, February 2, 2008

It would be an understatement to say that the Community Outreach Team was surprised by the results and turnout of this meeting. Patricia looked out her window around six o'clock in the morning that day to see a news crew setting up its satellite tower across the street at the church. Her emailed prayer to the team was as follows:

Good morning my beloved friends,

The NBC 4 News crew showed up at least an hour ago to set up their equipment.

I've been wrestling with where this is going, and remembering the scripture from Luke 3, John the Baptist is baptizing (representing the church). All the people from the cities come and ask him, the church, "what shall we do?" He tells them to repent, which means, "turn your life around."

I'm not suggesting we use scripture or religious language, but God has given us the authority to summon the world, and today the Hilltop, to turn its life around.

I think we hear the same blessings and concerns we asked for in the original meeting, presenting the results of the two meetings at our next meeting along with safety and economic development reports to identify low hanging fruit. What would it take to turn the life of Hilltop around?

God is using you mightily, and in the name of Jesus, I ask that we may be filled with the power and authority to which God is calling us. Thank you for healing the world. Amen. Patty²

The prior day, there was a piece on local television Channel ABC 4 about the community meeting that was to take place. The abbreviated narrative on their website was as follows:

COLUMBUS, Ohio – West Side businesses struggling to stay afloat have a chance to create change Saturday.

A "Where There's A Will, There's A Way" community meeting begins at 10 a.m. Saturday at the Parkview United Methodist Church, NBC 4 reported.

The meetings hope to evoke resident and community leader discussion on ways to recruit and retain businesses in the Hilltop area.

Saturday's meeting is the second in a series of three.

Parkview United Methodist church is located at 345 South Brinker Avenue.

At the group's final meeting in February, suggestions will be given to community leaders. Anyone is invited to attend the meetings.³

The Community Outreach Team notified the press of the meeting but did not hand deliver invitations as before. The church once again served food, a light breakfast this time, and the agenda was nearly the same as before with the exception of reporting on the previous meeting. There were one hundred fifty persons in attendance with three news cameras running for the full meeting.

The meeting itself was exciting despite the lackluster agenda simply because there was so much energy in the room. People were helpful in setting up more chairs, and even the extension to Fellowship Hall was filled. One person remarked, "About twenty-five

² Email from Pastor Cook to Context Associates, 2 February 2008, 7:00 a.m.

³ Available at <http://www.nbc4i.com/midwest/cmh/news.apx.-content-articles-CMH-2008-02-01-0028.html>; Internet; accessed 2 February 2008.

years ago there were meetings like this, but no one did a thing. There was no action that came from them.” The remark led the team to believe that Parkview had stumbled onto a simple truth: the Hilltop neighbors wanted someone to listen to them, and the politicians present came inquisitively as well, “what shall we do?”

The facilitator, Tom Rutan, (one of the Context Associates) wrote later that day,

It was all we had hoped for and more. I was shocked with the number of people who joined us. That speaks to the importance of this work. We are the tools needed to do some very good things here. Let's hope that we have the vision and perseverance to finish the work. The news reports were nice. All three major networks carried pieces on the 6:00 p.m. news. They will probably air again tonight and tomorrow morning.⁴

The results of the meeting are detailed below in the press release Tom wrote that day to the local newspaper:

Area Residents Meet: Express Concerns and Offer Suggestions

On Saturday morning, Feb. 2 more than 150 area residents and interested individuals met at Parkview United Methodist Church to share concerns about Quality of Life issues on the Hilltop and in the Westgate area in particular. Concerns were expressed on issues regarding economic development (the increasing loss of businesses on the west side), area infrastructure (roads, sidewalks, curbs, park maintenance, snow removal, etc.), education (quality programming for west side schools, building and grounds appearances and upkeep), crime and safety (drugs, prostitution, graffiti, vandalism, theft, etc.) neighborhood stability and vitality including general upkeep and litter control in the area and governmental responsiveness to resident's concerns.

Initiated by a vision of new Parkview Pastor Patricia Cook to have the church become a more vital influence in the Westgate community, an Outreach Committee was formed and an initial Community Leaders' Forum was held on January 18 with over

⁴ Email written by Tom Rutan to the Context Associates, 2 February 2008 9:11:24 PM.

fifty people attending including several elected civic leaders. Those at the Feb. 2 meeting heard presentations by current Columbus City Schools Board of Education Member Gary Baker (past chairman of the Hilltop Area Commission) on the progress of the Hilltop Area Plan, Columbus City Council Members Priscilla Tyson and Herschel Craig on efforts that are underway with the City to address west side issues, State Representative Dan Stewart on efforts he is spearheading to re-energize the area including the return of the Hilltop Neighborhood Parade, and Columbus Police Department Community Liaison Officer Ken Ramos on steps residents can take to address safety issues.

Several suggestions for action steps were offered by those attending to help engage the community in proactive ways to address the concerns and to build upon the many positive attributes the Hilltop/Westgate area possesses. A third meeting to identify specific ways that area residents can become involved in a formal action plan to revitalize the Hilltop will be held at Parkview Church, 344 S. Algonquin Ave., on Tuesday, February 26, 2008 at 7:00 p.m. The public is invited to attend that meeting and to get involved with community improvement efforts.⁵

A question Patricia raised to the Columbus Police Department Community Liaison Officer at that meeting regarded accessing crime statistics for the February 26 meeting. In front of one hundred fifty people he promised he would bring them, but when the day came, he was late in showing up and despite reminders, he did not have the crime statistics.

One of the best pieces of work that came out of the meetings was presented and distributed at this meeting—a detailed analysis of all the civic groups meeting on the Hilltop, what their function is, when they meet, and how to connect. Courtney Dekle led the Context Associates to compile all the information. Ironically, the phone calls and emails to these groups, along with the meetings held at Parkview, seemed to nudge some

⁵ Press release written by Tom Rutan, Context Associate, 2 February 2008.

of the groups to begin meeting or to stop talking and start doing. For the next few months there was a flurry of action all across the Hilltop.

From an analysis of the first two meetings, the Context Associates identified three areas of concern for the Hilltop:

1. Education: There was great concern over the conditions at the former jewel of the Hilltop, West High; about the five active gangs on the Hilltop, and about the lack of extra-curricular activities for young people.
2. Community Development: rumors of Kohl's and Target department stores closing surfaced at the meeting along with lament that Meijer's had just closed. People were concerned about the West Broad Corridor, Sullivant Ave. blight, and the lack of places to dine out and shop on the Hilltop or even on the west side of Columbus.
3. Public Safety: there were complaints about prostitution and drug dealers visible on W. Broad St. and Sullivant Ave., urging the police to take action.

On the evening of the third meeting, Tuesday, February 26, 2008 at seven o'clock, the streets were full of new snow and ice from earlier in the day and it was still snowing. The data from the prior meetings indicated there were three areas of interest: education, public safety and community development. The plan was to listen to the crime statistics presentation and break into small affinity groups to process the crime information as it spoke to the group's agenda. When the Community Liaison Officer did not arrive to speak to the requested crime information, the ninety persons who came were divided into the three affinity groups without the crime statistics. The context associates led these smaller group meetings to formulate a plan of action.

The failure of the Community Liaison Officer to follow through with the presentation of the crime statistics was a blow to the energy of the meeting and to the morale of the Context Associates. Instead of the usual flurry of excited emails, there was

silence until the following week when the group began to plan for the next meeting, which ironically turned out to be the best meeting of all.

There were only fifty persons at the fourth meeting, April 5, 2008. Patricia reviewed how the work done thus far and identified important understandings gleaned from the first three meetings:

1. Discerned three areas of concern from the needs expressed at the first two meetings: Community pride and development, crime and safety, and education.
2. Created a document that would organize the Hilltop agencies' purposes so that efforts were not being duplicated.
3. Researched what formal plans were presently in place that would contribute to the need for Hilltop's "Renaissance," finding that some plans have been either forgotten or postponed.
4. Attended many of the local group meetings that discussed other issues here on the Hilltop.
5. Accessed 19th Precinct crime statistics for 2004-2007.

The highlights of the meeting included summaries by the context associates of the small groups they led, a presentation by Mr. Chris Boring on the study he had just completed for City Council on the West Broad Corridor, presentations by other agency leaders, and a review of the crime statistics Patricia had finally been successful in obtaining through the Police Community Liaison Officer. After the third meeting Patricia told him about the effect he had had on the meeting, so he became cooperative in helping her to obtain the statistics.

The Columbus Assistant Safety Director was on hand to review the statistics at the April meeting. As he was about to close his presentation on a positive note, one young woman living a few blocks from the church told her story of being savagely burglarized where everything in her home was thrown on the floor including plastic food

storage bags from their boxes. She said six of her neighbors had had the same experience, and she wanted to know what was being done. Four months later Patricia is still waiting for the Assistant Safety Director to respond to the questions she raised at the meeting, despite repeated emails and phone calls.

Analysis of Data

In recalling the data of the interviews, the small group gatherings and the larger community meetings, there is an avalanche of rocks under which Patricia looked in the process of discovery. But how do they fit together?

By looking for themes throughout the data, the first common theme is that people are the most valued asset in all the groups. Several of the one-on-one informants said that the Hilltop's people are its greatest asset. In the small group gatherings of the congregation, the value is placed on its peoples' ministries, on visitation, people who invited them to the church, people who are missed in the pews, people who are desired to come to the church. And in the larger group gatherings, it is from the people that answers will come. One of the comments made by the presenter of the West Broad Corridor study is that Hilltoppers will wait forever if they wait for the City to act. He said, "The power is within you. The action will come from its people and from this church."

Second, the theme of love and devotion permeates the fairly secular data. For Hilltoppers, even a community in decline is better than no community at all. The one-on-one informants were all referring Patricia to a work of love in her pastorate: visitation, inviting the GLBT community, creating a parallel congregation—these are all about relational ministry. The small group gatherings were full of love for each other and for

the church, for Jesus and for youth and children. And the community meetings were full of love for the Hilltop, for its traditions and for its people.

Third, there is a theme of loss in the data—a lament and a grieving for what used to be: a judge remembering the good times of growing up on the Hilltop, a historian grieving that the Bean Dinner is no longer what it once was, a congregation grieving that children and youth no longer come to Parkview, that desegregation devastated the church, and a community grieving the loss of businesses, jobs, and well schooled youth.

Fourth, there is a theme of forgottenness in the data. Forgottenness is about nobody-ness. It is about still being present but overlooked. In the interviews, the lay leader said the congregation was once sixteen hundred people but only one hundred sixty now belong. The congregation gatherings seemed to be lamenting that the neighborhood had forgotten them since so few visitors had come in recent years. And at the fourth community gathering the City of Columbus representative who studied the West Broad Corridor told participants that if they wanted something to happen they would have to do it themselves.

And last, there is a theme of hope, and hope creates its own energy. The retired District Superintendent bid me to gather the congregation for meetings. They were thrilled to be asked. The Church Council proudly gave its stamp of approval to the energetic Community Outreach Team. And the Community was aching to be invited to give voice to their concerns. There is enormous energy, almost too much to do, and competing needs spawn a sense of urgency. The congregational and community meetings were far too important to allow their presence and content to die without action from the church, the Community Outreach Team and from the community.

Outcome

The question that begs asking now is, “Is the data sufficient to suggest that by using this three-pronged model Patricia discovered the church and its community?”

Not only did Patricia discover the church and its community, but the church and the community discovered her as a prophetic voice in the public square, speaking truth to power and greeting politicians who have come to ask, “What shall we do?” Participants were begging for more meetings, and a local politician came from City Council with suggestions about how the church could get involved in scrap metal legislation, or in becoming an academy for gang education, neighborhood safety, the Police Explorer program, another Hot Spot campaign or a “Start a Small Business on the Hilltop” forum.

What has God already begun? God has given the church hope and proof that it can step outside its walls to meet the community that has been waiting for it to act. And God has given the Hilltop community an advocate—Parkview United Methodist Church. It is thrilling to think what God may do next.

In the next chapter, Patricia will reflect on the project, its impact, what might have worked better, and the potential for further ministry.

CHAPTER SIX

REFLECTION, SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Reflection

How do you listen to a church and its community? How do you discover them?

This chapter addresses Patricia's reflections on the field experience of her model: one-on-one interviews, small congregational group meetings at members' homes and four larger community meetings. She will share her conclusions regarding the project, including what might have been done differently, and the transformation she sees in the church and in herself.

Reflections on the Methodology

Because one of the by-products of this project was building relationships through presence and engagement of the informants, a quantitative approach may have produced a different result. Patricia took most of her one-on-one informants to lunch. There were personal conversations as well as the questions she asked them. They caught up with each other on what they're doing and lingered over iced tea or coffee. In the congregational group gatherings, Patricia learned a lot about the host households, saw pictures of their families, furniture they had refinished, areas they had remodeled. In short, she was much more able to engage with people by hearing their thoughts about the church. Therefore, the qualitative approach to the research was appropriate for this project.

That is not to say that engagement cannot happen around quantitative analysis. But it is difficult to quantify subjects that are deeply held and spiritual in nature. People can be very emotional about their church and their faith. The nature of qualitative analysis is that it allows for peoples' stories. In one of the groups a couple told the story of finding each other in the church after both their spouses had died. The story was touching—and sacred.

The questions that were asked in those small group gatherings caused people to think about the systems and ministries at the church. "Would the neighborhood miss my church at all if we closed our doors? What are we really doing for the neighborhood?" The questions were thought-provoking and evoked excellent discussions.

In the larger group discussions, the context associates did not know what to expect from those who came. Qualitative research allows researchers to intuit and to adjust the questions, whereas the questions are more static in quantitative research. This flexibility allows for some creativity and spontaneity.

The initial meetings Patricia led with her Context Associate group teaching them the methods behind Appreciative Inquiry created the space to do some dreaming using the "4-I Model:" Initiate, Inquire, Imagine, Innovate.¹ These words challenged the team to think beyond themselves to the community and to dare to dream with God. But they soon saw that Appreciative Inquiry was not going to allow folks to come and name the pain that would inevitably surface in the community meetings: drugs, prostitution, homelessness, businesses moving out, no place to shop, poverty. "Appreciative Inquiry writings do not attend to the biblical acts of lament and confession. Because it is easy for

¹Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 29.

organizational conversations to become mired in negative, repetitious analysis that leads to blame and defensiveness, there is little confidence in the role that might be played by these social-spiritual practices.”² This attitude convinced the group that they would want to turn the meetings toward being as positive as possible, but they still wanted to allow participants to name the pain.

The turn to Asset Mapping identified the players in the community and helped the Context Associates/Community Outreach Team to deepen their attitude of abundance. At the close of the meetings, Patricia would recap what she had heard and affirmed to the participants that the answers were “within you” (the people in attendance). The happy medium between lament and abundance created hope for the Context Associates and for the informants at the meetings.

Locating the Project

“The project is located on the boundary between the reality and the ideal.”³ The church is a microcosm of the community. The reality is that both communities, the church and the Hilltop, are in the chaos of decline. For the Hilltop, the pain of lost businesses, people moving out for better schools, loss of funding and community attention, the besmirching of what used to be its good name on television news reports about homicides and crime on the Hilltop, the ever present noise of emergency vehicle sirens, visible lines of people waiting to get into the food pantries and Freestore—all of these are the Hilltop’s visible reality. For the church, theirs too is the loss of people, the increased burden of having to pay for a building that ten times more people used to

² Branson, *Memories*, 52.

³ Quote from Dr. Larry Welborn, Academic Advisor to Patricia’s project, 23 January 2007 lecture.

support. The shame of it all is unnamed but spoken just the same. When the church and the community confront each other face to face, the unspoken truth is that “neither of us is what we used to be.” In truth, neither is the researcher. She had some heart issues after performing thirteen funerals in two months during the most intensive time of this project.

What then is the ideal? The ideal is for both communities and for Patricia to be healthy, to affirm who they have been, who they are now, and who they would like to become. In the case of the church, it knows it needs the community, but it wonders, or even fears, who the community has become. In the case of the community, Patricia would have thought that the Hilltop would see the church as disconnected, irrelevant. But when the church extended the invitation to the community to come and dream, the community saw something in the church with which it could identify. Patricia and the church and the community have all been faced with their own mortality.

People in the church and people in the community think of the ideal as the way things used to be. In the church, it was when there were sixteen hundred members filling the pews. The church was full of children and families, and the Sunday School classes were bulging with activity and life. There was no thought of having to close the doors of the church.

People in the community remember when Westgate was *the* place to live on the west side of Columbus. West High was a dream school for them, integrated and leading the charge for education, music and sports in the community. Westland shopping center was a thriving shopping experiment, and the West Broad corridor housed successful small businesses. Drug deals and prostitution and homelessness were unheard of on the Hilltop.

But God is ever in the business of bringing new life. When the surprised community saw that the church cared and asked for nothing more than presence and voice, there was a symbiotic benefit. The church now has recognition in the community as an advocate for the Hilltop. During the weeks of the meetings, the church received front page coverage for their work in the community. The church could never have paid for that kind of promotion. Parkview found its prophetic voice in the public square. Where else could people gather in the up-close-and-personal presence of so many politicians where people could speak their truth without the agenda being set by politicians? Simply by creating the space for listening, the church strengthened the community's ability to reach its new potential by focusing on the assets at hand—with the biggest asset being its people.

And the benefit to the community is that the meetings at the church spawned a whole flurry of meetings throughout the Hilltop. People met to clean up the softball field back of West High and extract a tree that had been grown up in the bleachers. Calls were made to the West High principal to have standing water drained from the field so the girls' team could play ball. A new Westgate group whose genesis was at the first community meeting began meeting across the street at the park. It now boasts one hundred members. "It's working to bring more small businesses to the area, including restaurants, coffee shops and bookstores on W. Broad Street and Sullivant Avenue."⁴ Other groups met to clean up trash in other areas. And a new group, "the TAG (Together Against Graffiti) Team" was formed to remove graffiti from around the Hilltop. Two of

⁴Sherri Williams, "An Affordable Oasis," *The Columbus Dispatch*, 10 August 2008, sec. B, pp. 1-2.

the Context Associates were instrumental in donating funds for the purchase of a power washer and are both members of that group.

To Courtney Dekle, the Hilltop holds the potential to become a premier central Ohio community. "If you close your eyes and imagine, there's a good store here and a coffee shop there," Dekle said . . . "It's just terrible," Dekle said. "There is a lot to be said about a community that's not so positive when the graffiti has been there awhile." She decided to do something about it. Dekle and her husband Chris asked their fellow members of Friends of the Hilltop to join them in removing graffiti from various homes and businesses around the area. A committee soon formed that called itself TAG (Together Against Graffiti). To graffiti vandals, a "tag" usually refers to a signature applied in spray paint to a wall.⁵

Throughout the project the Context Associates became more than the Community Outreach team or a missions team. They became a justice team⁶ because of their hard work in helping people in the community to find its voice in the public square and to speak truth to power. The young woman who fell victim to the drive-by shooting could relate to the young woman in one of the community meetings whose home had been savagely burglarized. As a justice team, they moved each citizen a little closer to becoming a change agent⁷ on the Hilltop.

The scripture from Luke 3 and its parallels to the church and its community became prophetic to this project. It was during the project of listening to the community that Parkview was able to claim the leadership role of John the Baptist in the community. Burdened with the bad news of drugs, gang activity, gunfire and decline in The Hilltop area, urban seekers came to the church asking, "What shall we do?" Politicians paid by

⁵Rachel Scofield, "TAG Team Tackles Graffiti Problem," *Westside Messenger*, 25 August 2008, 1-2.

⁶Quote from a lecture by Dr. Larry Welborn 23 January 2007.

⁷ Ibid.

the government came as well, asking, "What shall we do?" People from the news stations came asking, "What shall we do?" The church baptized them with hospitality and advocacy and stood in solidarity with many of their issues, with a sense of community, with powerful dialogue about what remains strong on The Hilltop, and with empowering information on how each person can take action to improve their own corner of the community.

In Luke Chapter Three when urban seekers come and ask John the Baptist, "What shall we do?" John's prescription is repentance, turning one's life around. Likewise, the people from the urban neighborhood, the city, came to Parkview looking for answers. "What shall we do?" At the church they heard that it is possible to turn the Hilltop's life around.

The Hilltop is experiencing some resurrection, the church has grown by eight new members, and Patricia got some help with her heart and is walking two miles a day over at the park, connecting with other Hilltop walkers. People now consider her and the Context Associates as leaders on the Hilltop. Neither the church nor the community nor Patricia are living in the ideal, but they are closer to it than they were before the project began.

The ideal is not utopia. The "good 'ol days" of the 1960's for church, for Westgate and for the Hilltop, will have to be a good new day, for the neighborhood is more diverse today, and new issues confront the community. New dreams will have to be dreamed and new solutions created to make those dreams a reality.

The ideal for the church would be to stay connected with the community, standing in solidarity with those who have been forgotten. In the community meetings,

the church shone a bright light on the Hilltop's state of affairs—three burglaries each day in Westgate, five active gangs on the Hilltop. When the context associates discovered that there actually was a plan, printed in elaborate booklets, a dream to resurrect the West Broad corridor, shelved and forgotten, the group asked, “why, and when can we begin again?” At the community meetings the plan was unearthed and became a part of the conversations going on at the church.

What Would Have Worked Better

With regard to the interviews, Patricia only regrets that she had not done more of them, especially with residents of the Westgate neighborhood, with customers of the food pantry at the church, with more community leaders. She tended to interview people she knew instead of people she wanted to meet. She has been at Parkview only one year. There is still time for those interviews.

With the congregational small group gatherings she would have preferred to publish more of her findings. She could still do that, especially with Church Council, asking them for their feedback on the answers she collected. It would be a good learning experience for Patricia and for Council members, and, God willing, it is possible that some new ideas might come from their review.

For the community meetings, the numbers of people who came were overwhelming to the group, but did not change the group's approach to the meetings. The initial community meetings were meant to reach out to Westgate alone, a small island in the middle of the Hilltop. Instead, people from all over the Hilltop came, and the circle was widened to include them. Unfortunately, there was no thought as to how to reach

people living in poverty because the diversity of folks who came to the church seemed to be enough at the time. In the end, the voice of the poor was missed.

A television news reporter at two of the meetings pointed out that if the topic was crime, there needed to be recovering criminals at the table. She covers crime almost every night on the Hilltop, and she thought those committing the crimes should have been invited. It is unclear how that might have happened, but it would have been a reality check to hear the voices of gang members.

One of the frustrations of the Context Associates was that they were not sure of their role beyond facilitating the meetings. Not trained in public policy planning or urban management, they were dealing with urban issues beyond the scope of their training. Gathering the issues into the three categories of community development, crime and safety and education somewhat minimizes them. How do you respond to a woman who has suffered a drive-by shooting? Or a savage burglary? Or people who have fought with the city for years for new curbs and safer sidewalks so their children can walk to school without walking so near to traffic? The Context Associates did not feel comfortable responding, "I'll get right on that," because they did not feel they had the authority to deal with the issues. But they did refer these complaints to the appropriate city leaders if they were not already present at the meetings.

There were reporters and politicians present who have been charged with delving into those issues. The responsibility of the Context Associates lay in their uncomfortably limited role as a justice team: discovering the issues, shining a light on them, standing in solidarity with God's people experiencing the issues, and serving as a catalyst for change.

Standing in solidarity with God's people is a skill the church does not teach. The church tends to want to fix problems instead of empowering others to do so.

Is the Project Replicable?

A pastor would not have to be a new pastor in the church or in the community in order to try this model. But it is particularly good for a pastor who is new to the church and to its community. One-on-one interviews, congregational listening groups and larger community meetings are excellent ways to connect with and listen to the community. It is interesting that in interviewing people, they become connected with the church simply because they become intrigued with finding answers. In the small group gatherings, the connections extend from small group to pastor to reconnecting with each other. In the large community meetings, the connections are among residents, with the pastor, with politicians and with people from the church. All these connections make the project worthwhile because when trust is built, giftedness is unwrapped, and everyone has something to bring to the table of transformation.

Though the researching pastor has the benefit of exposure to local government officials, it was the Context Associates who invited the local politicians. In addition to local business owners and community leaders, a pastor would want to invite:

- The local Police Chief, who may send a liaison
- The Safety Director
- Members of City Council
- School Board Representatives
- The Mayor

- The local State Representative
- County Commissioners
- The local State Senator
- The Governor
- The local U.S. Representative
- The U.S. Senator

Because it was an election year when these meetings were held, most of the candidates asked how much time they would be allowed. The group tried to allow each candidate a small time to speak, but with some reluctance—it seemed that the candidates preferred the focus on them instead of on the local citizenry.

From the list above, the U.S. Senator, the Governor, and the Mayor did not attend perhaps because it was not an election year for these offices. However, the pastor and Context Associates were mildly surprised that the other offices were represented, and their presence created a good deal of energy in the meetings.

Rural or urban, both communities would have people who could be interviewed to inform the pastor. Rural or urban, each would have a congregation who could meet in small groups even if it is only one small group. Rural or urban, big or small, the church can invite the community in for meetings about issues that are relevant to the community. Patricia would plan to replicate this project in future churches she would serve and would recommend it to any pastor who wants to discover his or her congregation and its community.

Measuring the Project

“The real test is not how much we want to do something but how much love is a part of what we want to do.”⁸ The data collected from doing the one-on-one interviews to discover the church and its community would have been informative—period. But the power was in the action that came from some of the suggestions received. Gathering the congregation into small groups, picking up the visitation ministry, the switch from Appreciative Inquiry to Asset Mapping—all these were gleaned from doing the interviews. These suggestions were powerful because they created powerful ministry where entirely new experiences surprised both the congregation and the community. The rest of the information gleaned from the interviews was valuable as part of Patricia’s formation in understanding the community: the pride and lament of the church, the pride and lament of the community. These sentiments are worn on the sleeves of those who worship and live on the Hilltop.

Measuring the discovery in the small congregational meetings could be confined to the success of the turnout of so many in the worshipping congregation. Worship attendance averages seventy-three people. There were seventy people who came for the small group gatherings, a success of numbers to be sure. But there was more to celebrate than just the level of participation. Each host tended to gather people with whom the host was friends, so Patricia learned about alliances by studying the host/guest relationships. Another revelation was in learning the socio-economic milieu of the congregation. Many of the men had worked for Ford and General Motors on the Hilltop and had come from blue collar families. In retirement, they live comfortably, and most of them sent their

⁸Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, Susan M. Ward, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 49.

children to educations they themselves could not afford in their teens and twenties.

Instead, they had gone to fight in World War II, and most of the men are extremely proud of having done so.

Prior to coming to Parkview, Patricia had served large and wealthy congregations. Though she had requested an urban church in this appointment, she came to Westgate with some trepidation about living in a community of gunfire and decline. Her home in Bexley where she had lived for four years was only a few blocks from the Governor's mansion, and she had been spoiled by the peace of being able to take a walk at any time of night without fear. Hearing gunfire in the park across the street from the Parkview parsonage was a wakeup call that she was no longer living in privileged insulation.

The Parkview congregation has members who drive in to volunteer or "drive by" for a one-hour worship service. Only a handful of them still live near the church, so being with them in the small group gatherings did not encourage Patricia's identification with the community. When Patricia first came to the Hilltop, she shared their isolation from the community. With three burglaries a day in the police precinct in which Parkview is situated, it seemed safer to live elsewhere. It was not until the community meetings that her heart was "strangely warmed"⁹ toward the Hilltop.

"[Howard] Thurman and [Martin Luther] King recommended love as the means for overcoming the barriers to community. Thurman concentrated on the power of love as a means of overcoming the internal barriers of deception, fear and hate. King emphasized love in respect to social justice and the organization of power in the creation of a responsible society. Dr. King identified the major crisis of our times as the collision

⁹Methodism's founder, John Wesley, said his heart was "strangely warmed" upon hearing the gospel anew one night while walking on Aldersgate Street in London.

between immoral power and powerless morality. His resolution of the dialectic created by this crisis is rooted in his understanding of *agape*. This interpretation of *agape* is decidedly Christocentric.”¹⁰ If that is true, people coming to Parkview for the community meetings met the courageous, truth-telling, urgent Jesus.

For Patricia, love has a hospitable soul. Leading the community meetings, as a qualitative researcher, she identified with the people of the Hilltop, and their issues became her issues. Their pride became her pride. Their lament became her lament. She believes the Context Associates share those sentiments. It all became a work of love, of giving and receiving.

In order to measure whether the barriers to community were overcome, the proof is whether people who were once isolated from each other actually come together in a shared purpose. The fact that an average of eighty-eight people came to four meetings or that there were three news crews there for one meeting is worth measuring. The two new action groups spawned from the meetings, the TAG Team and Westgate Neighbors, and the renewed efforts of the civic groups and commissions who had nearly ceased functioning are worth measuring as well. The TV and newspaper coverage the church received was also valuable. But in this project, the church became a member of the community again instead of an isolated beauty on the park, welcoming home a diaspora of drive-by worshippers. Though the congregation’s attendance at the meetings was dismal, less than twenty per meeting, there was a lot of talk among the members about the community meetings, and Patricia heard nothing but pride in the retelling of the stories by those who had come. And perhaps equally as important, the local politicians

¹⁰Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: University Press of America, 1989), 177.

continue to email and call Patricia to keep her abreast of Hilltop activities that are related to the meetings.

Where is God in This Project?

The Context Associates

The Holy Spirit surely chose the Context Associates because the synergy of the group members was instrumental in the work of reconnecting. Patricia was constantly amazed at the level of energy, expertise and enthusiasm they had, evidenced by the volume of emails, somewhere around three hundred. The nature of the emails included grappling with the direction of the group, legislative commentary about work at the Statehouse regarding the issues affecting the Hilltop, which groups are meeting on the Hilltop and who can go to their meetings, what legislation can be initiated through petition. Patricia never felt she would have been wise enough to identify all these gifts in the people she would recruit herself. She never stopped thanking God that these were the people God had called to the project.

Powered by the Holy Spirit, the Context Associates were the most functional group Patricia has ever seen at work in the church. But the overwhelming work shortened their fuse. Suffering from some burn-out and lack of job description, they are hoping others on the Hilltop will step up to the plate of leadership until they are reignited and called to a project they feel they can tackle. Patricia's dream is to lead them to organize Hilltoppers into creating a counter-culture against kids becoming gang members. They may have even better ideas in mind.

The Church

The project was chosen as an intervention at Parkview United Methodist Church. The church had become an alien in the midst of the community and did not know how to reconnect. Instead, it hoped people would somehow come through the door anyway. The church was nearly ready to close its doors at the time Pastor Patricia was appointed.

Since her coming, God's people at the church have increased their giving back to the level that was given in 1992 with only a third of the giving units. They have raised \$20,000 for the roof fund. The people have connected with each other through small group meetings and with the Hilltop during the four community meetings. Church members encountered the living, indwelling Christ at both the small group gatherings and for some, at the community meetings, transforming them into a listening congregation. At a town meeting held by the local State Representative, he bragged that he had attended all four community meetings at Parkview as if that was a credential for community involvement. For the congregation, its prior relationship to the community had become "I and it." But now its relationship is much closer to "I and Thou."¹¹

The Pastor

Perhaps as a result of the success of the congregational and community meetings, or perhaps it was that so much leadership was required, Patricia became recognized as a community leader after less than a year in her pastorate.

Shortly after the meetings Patricia was called upon to co-officiate a funeral with the local Catholic priest at the church he pastors. When Patricia was directed by an

¹¹The title of the book by Jewish theologian Martin Buber quoted earlier.

appointee of the priest to wear street clothes and to sit behind the family, Patricia felt that more was at stake than her pride. She felt that she represented a congregation and every woman who would follow her in that situation. The outcome was that she wore her robe and stole, processing with the priest, casket and family, and she sat on the chancel with the priest during the service. She became the first woman ever to preach from that pulpit.

The following day she saw the father of the deceased in Parkview's Sunday worship, and he said, "You sure wowed those Catholics. If you'd gone to the American Legion Hall after the funeral, you'd still be there signing autographs."

Next Steps

Shortly after the series of meetings ended, a representative from City Council came to talk to the group about scrap metal legislation. The church has suffered the vandalism of sixteen of its air conditioning units, so legislation tightening the sale of scrap metal was of great interest to the group, and they wanted to help. Although there seemed to be little the group could do at the time, he did indicate a possible future for the group and the church in supporting the Hilltop long-term by helping the Hilltop to gain some skills to help themselves. After his visit, Patricia identified a number of areas where the church might continue to be a catalyst for dreaming on the Hilltop:

1. A "gang-busting" effort that would target kids who stay illiterate throughout their school years and end up in gangs because they can't keep up with academics. "West High School had a 59 percent graduation rate in 2007, compared with 86 percent statewide,"¹² largely, one local counselor says, because reading levels are so poor. Local experts say the Hilltop's young people need mentors and tutors for elementary and middle school aged

¹²Williams, "Affordable Oasis," B-2.

children whose parents may not have read with them in order to help them learn to read and to affirm the value of reading for them. Parkview could be the coordinator for such an effort.

2. A neighborhood safety academy where the police could hold meetings with Hilltoppers to teach them how to keep from being burglarized, how to defend themselves during an assault, how to join a Blockwatch, etc. The church could also house a Police Explorer program for young people who wish to become police officers.
3. The church could lead another "Hot Spots Campaign" to distribute postcards to people who have had no success in getting police to respond to reports and complaints. This project finally worked on the Near East Side after police pledged not to retaliate against residents who complained about police service and follow-up.
4. A small business forum where enterprise would be encouraged through the teaching of how to start a small business: business plans, networking, how to start a non-profit, grant writing, etc. There are many buildings along the West Broad corridor that are either empty or housing pawn shops or check cashing loan sharks.

The pastor of the nearest United Methodist Church recently asked her church to welcome the gay community, and there was an uproar of protest. Following the meetings at Parkview, eight blocks away from the other church, the church council recently affirmed a statement of inclusion that welcomes people of all races, nationalities and sexual orientation. There will be much work ahead in welcoming these new neighbors.

Summary

When the project started, Pastor Patricia had been appointed to another United Methodist church in a neighborhood completely unfamiliar to her. She knew almost nothing about the church and only knew the neighborhood had a reputation for crime and for its volume of gunfire. She had already done a project on the opposite side of town that taught her a number of community organizing skills. She wanted to discover the church and the community around it. The intervention she designed consisted of:

1. Interviews with seven selected persons who could inform her new context, most of them over lunch and most of them prior to her actual move to Parkview.
2. Eight small congregational listening groups meeting at host homes responding to questions that helped the pastor to better understand the congregation.
3. Four meetings with the Westgate/Hilltop community.

The intervention lasted roughly eleven months altogether.

The project was successful in helping Patricia to discover the context, Parkview United Methodist Church, and the community from whom it had become disconnected.

In the process of discovering the congregation and the community, important connections were formed so that the church became highly relevant to the community, and Patricia's leadership was transformed from church pastor to parish pastor and community organizer.

Conclusion

The project was successful in the discovery of Parkview Church and its community. Because the church had been isolated for so long, the project was an intervention in the life of the congregation. It is now recognized as a church that is willing and able to walk with its surrounding community to new life, whatever that is—demanding increased community-oriented policing from the City of Columbus; coordinating tutoring and mentoring on the Hilltop, creating a counter-culture for its youth so that gangs are not the only choice for small group fellowship; advocating for the redevelopment of the West Broad corridor; leading legislative mandates for issues that plague the Hilltop. These are some possible choices for the church of 70-some worshippers who, since “Kids Club” ten years ago, had been isolated from the

community. Patricia also hopes that the church can become the purveyor of local youth singers and instrumentalists during Sunday morning worship.

The transformation in their pastor is that she has become a community organizer who may never return to being just a local church pastor unless it means connecting with the neighborhood. She regrets that more focus has not been given to gunfire on the Hilltop, but she has vowed not to stop speaking to power or to stop meeting with the community.

Part of the transformations of the church is that its church council and congregation has, since the community meetings, adopted a statement of inclusion that includes people of all races, nationalities and sexual orientation, and a gay men's group has been invited to sing at the church. Hoping to attract some of the gay population in the area, the church is inviting all the neighbors and will also host a blessing of local pets in the park across the street.

Part of the transformation is that Patricia reencountered the political Jesus, the Jew who spoke truth to the Temple leaders for collaborating with Roman oppression of its own people. Jesus created a crisis by turning over the tables in the temple, beginning the nightmare of trial and crucifixion. Patricia followed those footsteps during this project, and his courageous acts inspired her to take courage and confront powers and principalities as well.

The parish pastor and community organizer Pastor Cook has become is not the norm for most pastors in her Conference or her denomination. She and her doctoral colleagues have provoked some high level introspection about how to widen the circle of

pastors who embrace a community organizing model so that more churches become better connected to their communities.

In the public square that is the Hilltop, Parkview has become a prophetic voice in the tradition of John the Baptist. To the Hilltop community and to the world asking, “What shall we do?” she raises her voice, beckoning, “Repent—come and turn your life around.”

APPENDIX A
MAP OF GUNFIRE

APPENDIX A¹

Reports of SHOTS FIRED in Columbus in 2003

9,698



► 808 per month | ► 186 per week | ► 27 per day | ► 1.1 per hour

Gunshots a familiar sound across city

By John Fuddy
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The sound of gunfire is such a routine occurrence in Abigail Reed's South Side neighborhood that she doesn't bother to call police anymore.

Last week, she estimated that she had heard gunshots on six of the previous seven days.

"Sometimes, it's right outside my window," said Reed, who lives on 22nd Street south of Livingston Avenue. "It's becoming more frequent."

Although Reed isn't calling police, others are.

An analysis of Columbus police records found that dispatchers took 9,698 reports of shots fired in the city in 2003 — a rate of more than one report an hour. The total represents a 12 percent increase from 2002.

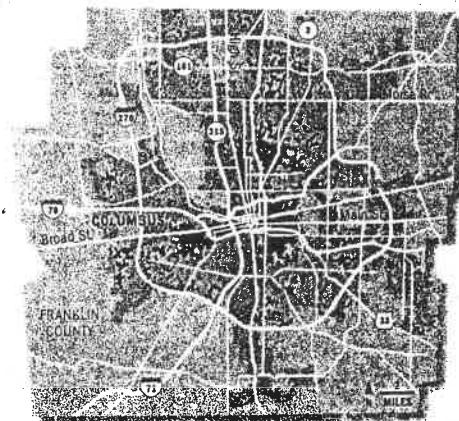
Local law-enforcement officials said they didn't pay close attention to the volume of those calls until it became apparent late last year that a serial shooter was firing at vehicles, primarily in southern Franklin County.

"I don't think we were fully cognizant that there were that many reports until the highway shooting case," said Deputy Chief John Rockwell of the Columbus Division of Police. "That certainly made it more of an issue."

A task force was formed and began seeking the public's help after one of

Shot-report locations

Columbus Division of Police reports of shots fired in 2003.
(Shots outside Columbus were reported to Columbus police via cell phone):



Source: Columbus Division of Police.

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

the shots killed 62-year-old Gail Knisley as she rode in a friend's car on the south Outerbelt on Nov. 25.

It worked. By the end of December, Columbus police took 995 reports of shots fired that month — a 48 percent increase over December 2002.

The Franklin County sheriff's office took 603 reports of shots fired in December, more than 10 times the number of similar calls during the same month in 2002.

The investigation into the high-

See GUNSHOTS Page A2

¹John Fuddy, "Gunshots a Familiar Sound Across City," *The Columbus Dispatch*, 4 April 2004, Sec. A, pp. 1-2. The Hilltop is in the lower left cluster of gunfire.

APPENDIX B
SERMON:
“THE INSIDE OUT CHURCH”

APPENDIX B

THE INSIDE OUT CHURCH

**Rev. Patricia Cook
Parkview United Methodist Church
October 28, 2007
Joel 2:23-32
Specifically,
Joel 1:10a, 12b, 13a, 14; 2:12a, 13, 25a, 26a, 28**

It is so very rare for me to even lie down during daylight hours, but actually going to bed is extraordinary. One day this week was like that. I watched a little TV and dozed, finding that I was a little depressed thinking about Parkview and the news I shared with you last week from the pulpit--that our increased giving is so appreciated, but still not enough to cover the shortfall from the budget, which now stands at \$58,222. I think I said that the increase in giving, though deeply appreciated, translated to \$1 per household per week. After I heard my mouth say it, I found myself deeply moved throughout the rest of the service. As I lay in bed, those words began to haunt me and I asked God to show me how to lead.

At 4 p.m. God showed up on the Oprah Show. Her guests were two people who were dying of cancer. One was a professor from Carnegie Mellon who had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer which is almost always terminal. His final lecture at Carnegie made the YouTube/email circuits perhaps because his extraordinary message was about how to live. The young woman on the show had liver and lung cancer, calling them "beauty spots" on her liver. She was young and quite beautiful.

Normally, when people who are dying of cancer appear on a talk-show program to discuss dying, their approach to the disease and dying is to say that they try to live every day to the utmost, to put their affairs in order and to make things right with their loved ones and with God.

The professor from Carnegie Mellon talked about what he had learned about life. This was particularly spectacular to me because professors, even pastors, so rarely share themselves or their reflections when they teach. Randy Pausch said things like, "Brick walls are there for a reason: they let us prove how badly we want things. The walls are for other people who don't really want it." "Experience is what you get when you didn't get what you wanted." These pithy remarks are appreciated from a truly wise guy with liver cancer.

The young woman on the Oprah Show had an entirely different approach. She said cancer had become her tutor for life. She started changing every single thing about her life. Instead of putting relationships to bed, she got married. She started practicing yoga, swinging from trapezes, making herself green veggie cocktails in elegant glasses and completely turning her life inside out. Even Oprah's Dr. Oz came to see how she was healing herself and prolonging her life so that he could teach others to do the same.

In fact, both of these cancer patients had framed the cancer as their tutors for life with the idea of doing something so radical with the immediate future that it might actually be powerful enough to heal them. If not, what had they lost?

As I lay there, remote in hand, I asked myself, "What if the budget shortfall were our tutor for life?" "What if the social cancer that has eroded so many mainline churches, the cancer of absence that has plagued Parkview, the cancer of shortfall in the lymph

nodes of the budget . . . what if all that cancer were our tutor for life? What if all the problems you have in your life, all the dying areas of sin or worry or chaos or poor health or pain were actually your tutor to live life to its fullest? Short of flying from a trapeze, how would you turn your life inside out and let the pain be your tutor to live?

In the Joel passage we just heard, Joel interprets the devastating effect of a locust infestation as a day of reckoning. The locusts were a cancer of their crops. You can only imagine the peoples' hunger and despair. They may have thought they were dying. Joel says, "The fields are devastated, the ground mourns; for the grain is destroyed . . . surely joy withers away among the people (vv. 10, 12b)." Has the joy in your life been withered away? Have the cares of life or health or finances eaten away at the harvest of joy in your soul?

Joel calls the people to repent, which means to completely turn their lives around. "Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests; wail, you ministers of the altar. . . . Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord (1:13a, 14) . . . Yet, even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart (2:12)."

The implication here is that something has distracted us. Hardship turns our heads from focusing on God, and instead we focus on the problem. It becomes our burden instead of our tutor. God is calling you, calling us, calling Parkview Church—"Return to me with all your heart."

During the last 5 Sundays we have rehearsed a model of prayer that has worked for many prayer warriors, the ACTSL prayer—say it with me—Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication and Listening.

- Adoration—to tell God how mighty and wonderful are the works of Christ, the works of the Spirit, and the works of God in your life. Your response is to adore others.
- Confession—to confess your love for God, to tell God your need and your sin, the sin of others against you. Clean house every day. Joel says, “Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing (2:13b).”
- Thanksgiving—from hearts of gratitude, we give God the glory for the mighty works done in us and in our church.
- Supplication—we pray for others and for our church, for the world, for those who are suffering. And don't forget to pray for yourself, that the cancer of life's burdens might tutor you in how to live.
- Listen—listen for God's heart, God's dream in your life, and in the life of our church.

What if that ACTS prayer became our daily discipline of re-turning, turning again, to God with all our hearts?

In Joel, the people heed the prophetic call to turn to God which evokes the Lord's removal of the plague and complete transformation of curse to blessing, restoration of what had caused the need. God promises rain and overflowing abundance. God says, "I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten . . . You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God who has dealt wondrously with you (2:25-26a)."

So how could today's problems, today's curses, today's cancer, today's budget tutor us to turn our lives around, to turn them inside out? In Joel's day the people deliberately fasted even though the famine may have forced them to. Like the woman with the cancer on the Oprah Show, they changed their clothes, stopped eating and started praying, crying out to God. They completely turned their lives around, and God responded with restoration and transformation.

Now if you're like me, you may like the routine of your life. You may appreciate the smell of the roses along the way of life. But I do think there are places in our lives that we'd give anything to change, and if you're like me, you tend to do the same old thing expecting an entirely different outcome. God is asking us to do something radical! For some of us, it will be summoning the courage and the faith to tithe. For some of us it will mean picking up the phone and finding a new doctor or a second opinion. For some of us, it will mean that we'll have to forgive someone or something that has disappointed us. For some of us, it will mean that our current life situation will need some major adjustments.

So what about us as a church? How can the cancer of our budget tutor us to do something so radical that it may in the end save us? How can we so engage the community that the church is turned inside out?

Actually, I think we've already started down that path. For me, walking across the street that first time with your lemonade and insulated jug was a radical leap of courage and faith. For those of us who will welcome children here Wednesday evening with your candy and Jesus' astonishing Bible stories, we will stand outside and let others taste and see that God is good. Advent will be celebrated here in the sanctuary this year, and we

want Christmas Eve to be a dream of music and scripture and candlelight for the community.

But it's only a beginning. We will want to spend a season together in discernment of how to live in 2008, asking you to help with some of the bills, and looking at our budget in new and fresh ways. The bratwurst grilled here during the Bean Dinner is a good example of turning the church inside out. In the next few months I hope we can turn the church inside out, re-evaluate our old ways of doing things, asking ourselves what could make the most impact for the community. Church growth experts insist people nowadays are intimidated by old church buildings. That means some of us who are able get outside, even to sit, could receive a blessing from a stranger on our street. What if the Empty Bowls food bank ministry was held outside next year? What if out on the lawn we served soup to those who drove by and asked them to buy a bowl for \$10 or whatever money they had? What if the chili cook-off that's held in February were moved to November next year when we could have it outside for the community?

Next Saturday there is a training for Faith Vote Columbus where we could send two people from our church to help people register to vote. We'd knock on local doors and say, "Hi, I'm from Parkview Church and we're helping people get registered to vote. If you're not presently registered, would you like to be?" I invite you to go with me next week to learn how to contact neighbors this way. How could we turn worship inside out?

Here is the church, here is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people. I think we always thought that meant to see all the people inside the church. Perhaps all along it meant that we are called to see the people outside the church walls.

The death of Jesus Christ on the cross has tutored Christians in suffering and dying to themselves and dead places in their lives for two thousand years. Thankfully, the cross never had the final word, because Jesus rose from the grave with all the authority and rejoicing that heaven could pour out upon humankind. Our God is in the hope business, but that hope is mediated to the world through the hands and feet and checkbooks and creativity of God's people. You are the solution God has been waiting for, and God is the solution you've been waiting for. It's a perfect partnership. Start with the ACTSL prayer, and see what creative solution God gives you to upend your life. Let Jesus help you carry your load and see how much lighter it is.

What does God say in Joel when the people re-turn to God?

"Then afterward, I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions (2:28)

Let us turn our lives and our church inside out, as God does a radical new thing in us. Let God help you turn your life inside out as we turn our church inside out and engage the community. Then we shall prophesy, then we shall dream, then we shall see visions, but only *after* we've seen who is outside waiting for us.

No Parkview, we're not ready to die yet. We've only just begun to live!

APPENDIX C
CONGREGATIONAL SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

APPENDIX C

Congregational Small Group Questions and Answers

10. What first drew you to Parkview Church?

A neighbor invited me
 Close by
 Born and raised in the church
 Pastor invited me
 Liked the way the church looked
 Kids' Club
 Mother made me go
 Wanted to sell cancer insurance
 Came with spouse who already attended
 The church needed a choir director
 Got married here
 Felt the Spirit in the church
 Looking for friendlier church than another local church I was attending
 I was always a Methodist and needed a neighborhood church
 Wife is on staff

11. If the church closed today, what would the neighborhood miss?

Food pantry
 Steak dinner
 Ham loaf dinner
 The building stood for something
 Bells that ring on Sunday morning
 Alcoholics Anonymous
 Round dancers
 People getting married
 Craft show
 Brats and baked goods at the Bean Dinner
 Americans today are self-sufficient
 Blockwatch meetings
 Fellowship
 Presence of the building/exterior beauty
 Nothing
 Too many United Methodist Churches in the area anyway
 Circles
 Young at Heart (senior citizens outings)
 Vacation Bible School
 Singing
 Freestore

Funerals
 Baptisms
 Paper recycling

12. What are the essential ministries at Parkview?

Food pantry
 Choir
 Scouts
 Children's ministries
 Theater group for youth (Parkview Players)
 Freestore volunteering
 Nurture and Care (visiting shut-ins)
 Prayer Shawl ministry
 Downsizing sale
 Sewing guild makes walker bags and burpees
 Prayer chain and list
 Pastoral visits
 Sunday School
 Music
 Men's and women's groups
 Softball team
 Pickup van
 Elevator
 Sunday worship
 Supper drama
 Sick/homebound tape ministry
 Education
 Sacraments

13. What must we stop doing?

Little girl running through sanctuary during worship¹
 Food pantry should go to the Cluster or reorganize it or combine it with another one
 Sarah's Kitchen (serving a meal at the Freestore on Saturdays)—not enough volunteers
 Sound system is not good
 Being judgmental
 Organized religion scares people into fearing God
 Keeping to ourselves
 Church Council
 Unloving spirit
 New hymns too hard to sing
 Criticizing children for normal behavior
 Exclusive behavior

¹ This was mentioned at every meeting except the one her father attended.

Too much ownership
 Change is hard
 Let people get comfortable before asking them to start serving
 Went downstairs too soon
 Church is doomed in basement
 Complaining
 Inflexibility

14. Why do you think the church has declined in membership?

Desegregation
 White flight
 Bad schools
 Can't afford church
 Two separate services
 Church is clique-y
 Neighborhood transiency
 Older neighborhood
 Unchurched neighborhood
 Catholic neighborhood
 New resident letters poorly received
 No ministries for children
 Competition from other churches
 Not hearing the gospel and about Jesus
 Young singles missing
 Casual church vs. dressy church
 Deaths/attrition
 Live music
 Rigid theology
 Sports on Sunday
 Personality conflicts
 Need hugs, not slaps
 Mexicans
 Ministers didn't care about kids
 Members grew up and moved away
 Pastors retiring
 Bad choices
 Society

15. What new thing must we insert in the life of the church?

Name of Jesus
 Youth ministry
 Everyone should be greeters
 Young blood
 An alternative class for the little girl who runs through the sanctuary
 Pick up children with van
 Attract children
 More social occasions
 Family night
 The neighborhood
 Prison ministry
 Contemporary worship
 More ways to get to know people
 Individual warmth, quicker to greet
 Keep the doors open during worship
 Younger families
 Welcome basket to neighborhood
 Music by youth
 Outreach—too internalized
 Mid-week service for people who need to be away on weekends
 Stand up and greet each other
 Name tags
 More live music, singing louder
 Need to teach the hymns
 Festival for families
 Must have nursery set up
 Kids helping older people

16. What are the needs of the neighborhood?

Public safety
 Property vandalism
 Arson
 Child safety
 Cancer
 Health concerns
 Drug costs
 Outreach to the community—health fair, senior options
 Partnership between church and schools
 Organized religion scares people
 Blockwatch people meeting on the lawn
 People are afraid to answer the door when Kiwanis sells their newspapers
 Folks don't know their neighbors any more
 Gangs on the Hilltop

Fewer children in neighborhood
Downhill slide of teenage kids

17. What are your dreams for the next six months?

Coffee house
Fellowship Hour
Once-a-quarter pot luck, bringing outsiders, followed by music
Increase in choir
Need young people
Saturday or Sunday evening service
More volunteers for the Freestore
Getting everyone to work together
Youth leader
Personal involvement with church for everyone
Need tangible goals and celebration of them
Stay in sanctuary instead of lower level worship
Finances—everything paid
Influx of people with energy
Activities outside the building
Once a month congregational meeting
Caroling
Worship in park
Sanctuary heated in winter
Hanging of the Greens
Survival
Pay apportionments
Tithing
Livelier music
Need a song leader

18. What are you willing to sacrifice to make these dreams a powerful reality?

Time
Money
Apportionments
Money stays in the United States
Presence
Effort
Support
The past

APPENDIX D

COMMUNITY MEETING #1 DATA

APPENDIX D

Community Meeting #1 Data

Context Associates Courtney and Chris Dekle's analysis of the results of the group's discussions are as follows:

Top quality of life elements identified (i.e., a wish list for the Hilltop):

- Safety
- Shopping, Dining & Economic Development
- Infrastructure-good roads/lighting/code enforcement/clean/aesthetically pleasing
- Diversity
- Stability
- Community Involvement/Pride
- Quality Schools
- Churches
- Home Ownership
- Recreational Opportunities/Green Space

Each table ranks assets of Hilltop/Westgate/Wiltshire Heights--top assets identified:

- Beautiful Community
- Great Library
- Recreation Center/Park
- Conveniently Located
- Business Opportunities
- Active Residents
- School Choice
- Senior Friendly
- Historic Significance
- Churches of Many Denominations
- Lifelong Residents
- Affordability

John Lowery Introduced (Former President of the Hilltop Business Association) detailing the following items that have received attention:

- Repairs to Sullivant Avenue and Demorest Rd
- Briggs Rd (will be adding center turn lane)
- Ground breaking on Health Center (converting fire station)
- Houses/condos on N. Wheatland Ave. to be built

New "Greater Hilltop Community" Directory
 Identified need for more restaurants in Hilltop
 Concepts can be seen at www.neighborhooddesign.org
 If it were its own city, the Hilltop would be 11th largest city in Ohio
 Westland Mall/Lincoln Village bought by Wexner for development?
 Possible plan for Delphi-International Trucking?
 H.B.A. meetings held at Mt. Carmel Hospital

Action Steps to Reach Goals:

Reduce Crime in Westgate/Wiltshire Heights—communicate w/ residents & police
 Attract Businesses and Restaurants
 Dialog with Columbus City Schools
 Promote our wonderful community to Columbus
 Create Task Force to Address QoL Issues with City of Columbus and/or Area Associations to Leverage Pressure to Action

Community Leader Suggestions

Representative from Ohio House of Representatives

- Wants to hold larger than normal town hall meeting at West High School
- Needs community support for upcoming events/meetings
- Bring back Hilltop Parade

Columbus Police Department Liaison

- Recently created business Blockwatch on W. Broad
- Working on starting a business Blockwatch on Sullivant Ave.
- Urges residents to be vigilant and communicate--Join your local Blockwatch!
- Residents should report any suspicious behavior to the police (to the anonymous line if desired # 645-4545)

Local Resident and Wiltshire Heights Blockwatch Member

- Would like to see development of BP lot on Sullivant & Hague Ave.
- Suggests Panera or a Coffee Shop (president of Panera believed to be area native)

City of Columbus Neighborhood Services Representative

- Recommends that the Community Outreach Team contact the Department of Economics
- Need to create "Neighborhood Plan"—be specific with issues—will require community support
- Clintonville recently pushed for four issues they wanted resolved

Local Resident

- Would like to see more support for Hilltop schools from Columbus City Schools
- Concerns regarding West High--band did not play for homecoming

West High School, CCS Liaison

- More support for Hilltop school should be coming—new person within CCS?
- Stability within administration at West High needed (6 principals in 12 years)

Local Resident, Wiltshire Heights Blockwatch

- Has convinced several friends to move to Westgate/Wiltshire
- Suggests others promote our area as the next place they should live

Local Resident

- Interested in starting a local Civic Association (promote our area/garden tours, etc.)
- Would like a local resident celebration (alcohol permitted)
- Suggests a satellite program at West High that would resemble schools such as Columbus Alternative High School (CAHS) or Fort Hayes

Index Card Comments & Concerns:

- “Have City Code Enforcement begin a pro-active enforcement of properties in violation”
- “Would like to be notified of future meetings and help with possible parade in fall with Rep. Dan Stewart”
- “Build up the High Schools on the Westside so families move back in the area.”

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